

# 12. 'Getting Out from Under': Leadership, Conflict Resolution and Tokelau Migration

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## Introduction: Migration and Population Trends

In the past three decades, Niue and to a lesser extent the Cook Islands, have figured prominently in the public discourse in Tokelau, in the Tokelau communities overseas, and in administrative circles, about choosing a viable political way for Tokelau. The threat constituted by the example of Niue—as it is represented in discourse in and about Tokelau—is that of a self-governing island state, most of whose able-bodied population are employed in the public service. The negative consequences of this situation are apparent: those who cannot get employment in the public sector leave and as a consequence, the villages and community life lose coherence, life and vibrancy. In addition, this kind of emigration causes village work and development projects to fail for lack of labour. (Such loss of manpower may occur independently, of course, as a result of forces separate from the question of a choice of political institutions; see Hooper, n.d.).<sup>1</sup> In contrast with Niue, Tokelau is represented as a unique case, and a recurrent theme in this discourse is the continued vitality, and relatively constant population figures, of village life in the atolls.

The dominant theoretical perspectives on migration have undergone a transformation over the last three decades. The model of migration as a predominantly unidirectional flow of labour from a home country to a diaspora has been challenged by the emerging configurations represented by 'transnationalism'. These configurations have in common a continuing flow of people, information and goods between two or more social spaces, and frequently crossing national borders (hence the term 'trans-nationalism'). The emotional value of these social spaces, which Lilomaivava-Doctor (this volume) has labelled 'homeland' and 'reach', may differ. A common trait for such situations, at least as they are manifest in the Pacific region, is that the different social spaces are connected by enduring and reciprocal social relationships, through ties of kinship and other institutional connections.

In spite of the discourse on the continued vitality and relatively constant population figures of Tokelau villages referred to above, the most recent census for Tokelau (from 2006) show an admittedly small, but still significant population loss. At present, it is too early to say with any certainty whether the most recent

population figures for the Tokelau atoll societies will be seen to constitute a definite trend of population decline or not. Comparative material from elsewhere in the Pacific (such as in this volume) suggests a development of continuous and multidirectional flows between different social spaces, therefore, some caution is required when interpreting the most recent population figures for Tokelau.

A useful place to start is to identify the social processes that underlie such figures. This is important, given the population size (see below for figures). The small population leads to a vulnerability in terms of ongoing viability, but also to a capacity for transnational mobilisation, when faced with events that have great potential social impact. As mentioned above, at the end of 2006, an increase was apparent in emigration from Tokelau. The emigrational pattern seems to have particularly affected the 30–50 age groups. Some people had also moved to Tokelau, but in smaller numbers. The latest Tokelau population census shows a decline of 20 per cent in comparison with the 2001 figure. In 1991, the population numbered 1,557 people; in 1996, it was 1,487 and in 2001, it was 1,449.

The total number of people living on the atolls has never been high: approximately 1,700 at most.<sup>2</sup> What we do not know as yet, is how many people who actually move between the atolls and the outside world between the censuses. This work still remains to be done, and the population figures hide the degree to which the people counted on the atolls might not be the same. However, it is possible to carry out a preliminary exploration of the social dynamics of the most recent population decline; in particular, it might be of interest to ask whether the population situation in the atolls can be better understood from a transnational perspective. This following exploration is based on my own fieldwork observations.

Reasons for a recent increase in emigration include: easier access to the outside world afforded by the introduction of a fortnightly charter that runs between Tokelau and Apia in Samoa; an increase in salaries in Tokelau so that more people can afford to leave; a marked increase in serious health problems and a lower standard of education. Together, these are strong motivating forces for further migration. A headline in the New Zealand newspaper, *The Dominion Post* (of 14 November 2006), hints however that there may be more sinister motives and forces behind the most recent population decline. The headline reads in eye-catching tabloid language: 'Sex and self-government blamed for population fall'. In this chapter, I present some thoughts on what I see as the social dynamics behind events that have resulted in such headlines and relate them to the transnational patterns of interaction between members of the various Tokelau communities in New Zealand and Tokelau.

## The Transnational Field of Pacific New Zealand

In contrast with the policies followed by, for example, Chile or France as colonial powers in the Pacific, New Zealand has opted to follow relatively closely the policy laid down in the United Nations' Decolonisation Charter (see Angelo 2001, 259 n 43).

Transnationalism is a useful concept because it points to the existence of a particular kind of social field with inherent characteristics that set it apart from other social fields of interaction that emerge as a result of regional interaction. Some of these characteristics have been mentioned above: the perhaps most important one is the increased frequency of contact across national borders, by multiple media, and on many different levels from the personal to a state apparatus. My use of the term thus differs from those who use it as a general label for all contact between island communities in the region, including precolonial ones (e.g. Spoonley 2001, 95). To take this stance is not to deny the point made by Marshall Sahlins in his polemic article addressed to Lévi-Strauss' civilization-pessimism, 'Goodbye to Tristes Tropes', where he draws a connection between earlier forms of migration in the Pacific region and contemporary migration (Sahlins 1994). He argues that contemporary networks and flow of goods, gifts, persons, rights and obligations perpetuate patterns that were present in earlier forms of regional interaction. Camille Nakhid, in her discussion of the applicability of theories of transnationalism to the particularities of the Pacific makes a similar point when she argues that transnational relationships in the region are typically characterised by reciprocity (this volume). In the same vein, Sahlins' perspective is important, especially as applied to Oceania, as much research has tended to perpetuate an image of historical discontinuity between the (exotic and interesting) pre-contact past and an (acculturated and uninteresting) present. In order better to understand situations such as that represented by contemporary Tokelau configurations—in and outside of the atolls—we need to develop perspectives that allow us to explore such long-term continuities represented by networks of social reciprocity. At the same time, they allow us to examine how nation-states may influence relations between Pacific communities in qualitatively different ways. In this respect, transnationalism has much to offer. It forces us to go beyond one location and one community and look for connections that create new divides but also bridge distances.

Over time, New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific region has changed. At one time the Pacific represented as a golden opportunity for New Zealand to establish a 'pan-Polynesian' empire while at the same time sever the strong political ties binding it to Britain—in order to establish itself as a nation with its own, independent political profile (Hoëm 2005). As is commonly the case with such visions, it was not realised as it was originally conceived. Also, and

because of Pacific peoples' greater familiarity with social conditions in New Zealand brought about by the wave of migration commencing from the early 1960s, the country does not figure to the same degree as the 'Promised Land' for prospective migrants. For example, Australia and the USA came for some time to be perceived as more promising destinations for people in search of work. Restrictions on migration also have been tightened. For example, the population (born after 1948, see NZ laws on citizenship) in what was then called Western Samoa lost their rights to New Zealand citizenship after Samoa became independent in 1962. At the same time, a new system of quota regulations for immigrants from Samoa was established. This system has, with certain modifications, remained to the present day. Today the quota is up to 1,100 immigrants per year (in addition to those entering New Zealand under ordinary immigration arrangements), granted that the prospective migrant is between 18 and 45 years of age and has a job offer. People from other Pacific nations, such as Kiribati, Tuvalu, Fiji and Tonga may enter under the 'Pacific Access Category'. New Zealand receives only a few hundred immigrants from these nations each year. Only the population from Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau still have unlimited access to the country. (See the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Relations and Trade web page for a fuller description of these policies.)

### **The Modern House of Tokelau: A House Divided?**

Beginning in 1993, the process of transferring executive and legislative powers from the New Zealand administration to the National Assembly or the General Fono of Tokelau commenced in earnest. The Tokelau public service, under the authority of the village councils of elders, the *tapulega*, was only truly established once the New Zealand run State Services Commission was decommissioned. In documents from 1998, the processes of establishing the institutions for internal self-government and the previously non-existent national level in the atolls were described together under one heading, as building the 'Modern House of Tokelau'. The metaphor of a house resonates with traditional ideas of governance and leadership in Tokelau. The formal address of the respective atolls is *Falefitu* or 'seven-house' (Atafu), *Faleiva* or 'nine-house' (Fakaofu) and *Falefa* or 'four-house' (Nukunonu). These forms of address refer to the atolls' former division into large kin-groups, occupational specialisation (such as warriors, priests, etc.), to village areas and, at least on Fakaofu, to men's houses (see MacGregor 1937; Huntsman and Hooper 1996).

Local perceptions and opinions on this exercise in governance—placing all under 'one roof', so to speak—were varied. Most agreed with the plan to relocate the Apia-based Tokelau administration and put it directly under the control of the elders. To make the three atolls work together as one nation was however not so easily achieved. A major difficulty emerged with respect to inter-atoll relations and the principle that the new political infrastructure should be based on Tokelau

culture. A solution had to be found to what was unofficially called the 'problem of rivalry'. This complex pattern of behaviour harks back to the 'days of war', a period when the people of Fakaofu ruled as overlords of the two other atolls (Hooper and Huntsman 1985). Fakaofu's dominance was contested and it is still the case that an atoll's or other social group's claims to a position of ascendancy is likely to be challenged by others.

The major obstacle to implementing the new infrastructure was the issue of the location of the head office of the Tokelau administration. This presented a particular difficulty, as to choose a permanent location would be effectively to place the chosen island in a position of permanent ascendancy. No unanimous agreement could be reached between the three atolls. The only choice left was to rotate the head office between the three atolls and this was implemented from 1994. It was discontinued in 1997, due to the personal costs to the public servants who had to move home every year. The national head office was therefore moved back to Apia, although recently there has been pressure to return it to Tokelau.<sup>3</sup>

## Forms of Sociality

Tokelau forms of sociality resemble patterns common to other Polynesian societies, in that they have fostered what I have described elsewhere as a 'sense of place' (Hoëm 1999, 2004).<sup>4</sup> This concept refers to peoples' constant awareness of the social composition of a social situation, caused by a concern with social life in terms of social relationships (*va*, lit. the space between) and relative status positions (*tulaga*, *nofoaga*, see also Tcherkézoff 2008). All significant social groups, such as extended families or kin-groups (*kaiga*), the villages (*nuku*) and the atolls have their own gatherings or meeting fora, the *fono*. In such gatherings, the place to be seated (*nofoaga*) is determined by status position (*tulaga*) and the congregated group traditionally used to sit in a circle along the posts (*pou*) that uphold the roofs of the open-walled houses.

Determining who is eligible to occupy a position depends on the nature of the congregation. In village councils, only older men and family heads are eligible participants. In a family gathering, other principles are followed. Male elders in the villages as well as the senior men and women in extended families have the privilege of deciding how the lives of their dependants should be ordered. The elders can, for example, place a restriction (*lafu*) on plantation areas on the outer islets across the lagoon, thereby pronouncing them off-limits for a period. In other words, they control peoples' access to their land-holdings. They may also ban individuals or families from the villages for improper behaviour, or order them to go overseas for more positive reasons such as to take up a scholarship. The moral universe is heavily influenced by Christianity, but the regulation and assessment of actual behaviour is also and ultimately carried out in terms of such notions as *noa* (free, unbound, improper) and *tapu* or more

commonly *ha* (or *sa*) (off limits, restricted, forbidden, or sacred), (Cf. Hoëm 2004: Tcherkézoff 2008: Valeri 2008).

This brief description of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion is presented in order to provide an illustration of how the villages are ordered; on the one hand, in terms of concepts of interlocking groups that ideally exist as a harmonious and well-functioning (*teu, maopoopo*) whole and on the other hand, how the actual processes of composing groups in terms of matching persons and positions are also commonly characterised by fierce competition and social exclusion.

### **Some Consequences of Establishing 'the Modern House' on Tokelau**

The difference between the amount of time spent on communal work for the villages and the value placed on it, as compared with the situation as it was only ten years ago, is striking and points to the speed at which changes in the economic basis of Tokelau society have occurred. 'Subsistence time' and 'office time' activities are a case in point. 'Subsistence-time' includes those centred on production (including fishing and other food-gathering activities), distribution and consumption of food. 'Office-time' activities are those that involve working in the various departments of the Tokelau public service. The two systems conflict in several respects and there are many signs that they have opposing consequences with respect to social reproduction. In short, whereas subsistence-oriented activities are geared towards reproducing large extended families and a network of inter-family cooperation, monetary based activities tend to produce smaller, more independent units that do not contribute in the same way towards village cooperation. This trend is visible in the atoll landscape as a result of the so-called housing scheme, which has resulted in a near total replacement of the traditional, thatched, open-walled houses by two-storey, concrete-floored modern housing with water catchment roofs. These houses allow smaller family units than previously to live together, and not least important, the walls provide a previously non-existent sense of privacy.

The monetary sphere is also intimately connected with demands for more frequent inter-atoll and national cooperation on a formal, institutional level. The emergence of certain conflicts between different systems of production and reproduction is clearly attributable to the UN and the New Zealand administration's project of establishing the local infrastructure deemed necessary for political independence. In other words, the contemporary rhythm of village life plays according to a different score from previously. Where in the 1960s, three months around Christmas were reserved for competitive games and festive activities, followed by more labour-intensive periods, now, work and leisure activities are more evenly distributed.

In addition, the past few decades have seen the rise of socio-economic divisions that have their basis in wage employment in the Tokelau public service. Whereas earlier there were differences between extended families in terms of the size of land areas they possessed, the ownership of land did not in itself make for prosperity. The prerogative to command able-bodied persons to gather and process food seems rather to have been the critical factor and this control was ultimately in the hands of the elders. In other words, through most of the period since the abolition of the kingship system in 1915, Tokelau has not experienced marked variation in the material status of its inhabitants. These days, such material differences are present, however, and socio-economic differences are easily detected when comparing the two-storey *palagi* houses containing satellite-discs, DVD or video players, freezers, microwave ovens and other consumer goods with other, more modest abodes with no such amenities. Thus, one may say that competing for honour has moved into new arenas.

Furthermore, and importantly for my discussion of possible factors that may influence emigration, there are signs indicating that the ‘rivalry’ or competition for honour that was an integral part of older political life in the atolls, have moved into the new arenas and institutions of the new administration, previously referred to as ‘the modern house of Tokelau’. A slight shift in the sites of political life, or rather, its expansion into new arenas, reproduces the traditional dynamic in the villages where one ‘house’ or encompassing group is pitted against other ‘houses’ or groups on a regular basis. The qualitative change lies in the fact that this rivalry now also occurs within the administrative institutions, and its associated arenas and media.

As mentioned above, local perceptions and opinions of the last decade’s exercise of governance have been varied. Most have been in agreement with the plan to relocate the previously Apia-based Tokelau administration to the atolls. The political rhetoric of the modern, or as it became in Tokelauan, the new (*fou*) house of Tokelau, was perceived by some as a bid for power by a particular group of public servants and elders, and it was challenged on those terms. This, in particular, was (and still is) done by one fraction of village leaders among those who have no or little previous background in public service positions. This faction prefers to play what may be called the ‘card of tradition’.

The main issue underlying the contemporary elections to political positions such as the *faipule* (minister of external relations) and *pulenuku* (village mayor), and in deciding issues during the General Fono is the question of whether people with allegiances beyond the atoll village (‘nationalists’) can be trusted at all, or whether people’s allegiances should be with those who have kept to one village and gradually built up their power base from their extended family and outwards (‘traditionalists’). As of today, the latter position seems to have ascendancy, as Tokelau, in its first national referendum (in February 2006) the vote against a

treaty with New Zealand granting political self-determination in free association with New Zealand, fell just short of the required two thirds majority stipulated by the General Fono. A second referendum was held in October 2007 and again although coming even closer to the two thirds majority, the result was still to remain what some may call a New Zealand colony.

Conflicting views as to how life should be lived in the communities, in Tokelau and also overseas, run deep. Underlying such stances, I have argued, is a common form of sociality or way of relating to a larger social body to which one feels a sense of belonging. This common form of sociality is expressed in the term *alofa* and other concepts of sharing and cooperation but also, according to my analysis, in ways of competing for ascendancy and control over local and extraneous resources.

### **Getting Out from Under?**

Prior to the 2006 referendum, delegates from Tokelau met with Tokelau communities in New Zealand and Australia in order to explain and discuss the contents of the proposed treaty between Tokelau and New Zealand. Members of the overseas communities were surprised and greatly disappointed to learn that they, as non-residents, did not have the right to vote in the upcoming referendum. The consequences of migration had never before been made so clear. As a Tokelau leader put it at one of the meetings in New Zealand, 'you have already self-determined [i.e. you have chosen not to stay and share our lot]. Now it is our turn to determine our future.' (Ulu, personal communication).

This situation caused some people to think that if Tokelau opted for self-government, they (in New Zealand) would lose their New Zealand citizenship. This unfounded fear led to strong feelings against self-determination among some (an apparent confusion between independence and self-government). As a result, relationships between overseas communities and Tokelau were activated, with some members from the overseas communities taking an active role in influencing the outcome of the vote, through nation-wide radiobroadcasts, as well as newsletters, visits, and telephone and internet contact with family members who were in the atolls. Thus, the existence of a Tokelau transnational community became manifest as a political reality influencing issues in the homeland.

The local circumstances associated with the second referendum, held in Atafu in 2007, were markedly changed. In order to explain an observed shift in allegiances, that took place between the first and the second referendum, I shall turn to the events behind the newspaper headline asking whether 'Sex and self determination [is] to blame for recent [population] trends?' Firstly, this case clearly demonstrates the extent to which new forms of media have become an integral factor in political life in the atolls and overseas. Secondly, the 'sex' part

of the news story refers to a much-publicised event involving a pastor who had a sexual relationship with an adoptive daughter, then 12 years old. At the time, he was made to leave Atafu by the council of elders. He returned after some years and, following the traditional method of conflict solution, went to the elders and abased himself by asking their forgiveness (*ifoga*). The elders seemed to accept his apology, but subsequent events demonstrated that the council was divided on this issue. When the man subsequently took up the position of pastor again, the dissidents, about half of the council of elders, stopped going to church. On 3 August 2006, the *New Zealand Herald* reported that ‘church boycotters lose village council jobs’ over this issue.

Both to boycott the church and to expel members of the village councils in this manner was unprecedented and unheard of in Tokelau. The dissidents in this case were soon nicknamed Al Qaeda and became the victims of overt, violent attacks against themselves and members of their extended families. This also unprecedented and culturally unacceptable overt violence caused quite a number of people to relocate to New Zealand. These exiles continue to await further developments in the hope of a possible return when more harmonious (in local terms, *maopoopo*, signifying togetherness and stable leadership) village conditions emerge. Members of this group have also pleaded their case in New Zealand newspapers, demonstrating once and for all that the scale and media of Tokelau political debate have expanded beyond the atolls.

A significant factor that links this case to the processes of implementing the infrastructure deemed necessary for an act of self-determination is the delegation by New Zealand administration of its powers to the local councils, the Council of Faipule and the General Fono. As a result of this delegation or transfer of administrative powers from New Zealand to Tokelau, there is a feeling of a loss of third party appeal to New Zealand and of being at the mercy of local power politics. However, those who feel this way are in this case left with ‘modern’ arguments, having to appeal to the human rights charter and principles of democracy, which do not hold as much authority in the villages as the more traditional ways of conflict resolution (*ifoga*) do. In consequence, those who feared loss of third party appeal shifted their votes: from the first referendum where they voted for national unity and political self-determination, in the second they chose not to place themselves ‘under’ the sole authority of the local leadership,

In sum, the conflicts between opposing views as to how life should be lived in the communities, in Tokelau and also overseas, run deep and have long histories attached to them. Underlying these stances however, are the very real issues of conflict and rivalry about positions of leadership in the new national government: in particular the positions of *faipule* (and *ulu*), but also the *pulenuku*, and senior administrative positions. The position of *faipule* has become increasingly

powerful, at the expense of the family (*kaiga*) representation and social security granted previously by the consensus-based village councils. This social security (expressed in the values of *maopoo*, cooperation, and *alofa*, love, generosity and compassion) was the basis of the legitimacy of the *pule* (power) of the village councils of elders.

During the last decade, an increasing number of people reject the dominant new form of leadership. They may have lost their faith in the *taupulega's* authority to ensure that their *kaiga's* voice is heard. As a result, some think that it is vital that NZ, the UN or other external institutions mediate. They see themselves facing a situation where they might risk being left with the current unstable and unpredictable local leadership.

## **Conclusion: Containment of Conflict and the Transnational Context**

The traditional leadership structure associated with the council of elders is challenged in many ways and an increase in violent and overt conflicts has ensued. Previously, overt expressions of conflict were strictly controlled and kept in check by the village councils and the recent events point to the elders' loss of absolute control over the *faipule*, *pulenuku* and the *aumaga*. At present, the situation can be described as one exhibiting a certain loss of legitimacy for both the traditional and the new leadership structures. The question of which principles should inform the present leadership configuration (democracy, titles, age or other factors) remain open, and I suggest that the difficulties that people experience at present because of this lack of legitimate leadership explains the most recent wave of migration.

As the voice of the council for the ongoing government of Tokelau itself stated, in its 2007 New Year message, 'The Tokelau Census result has also been the target of the outside media...Tokelau is a mobile and young population.' This statement can be read as a further example of the role of media in forging transnational connections. From the role that the Internet and radio broadcasts played in the recent referenda we see that events in the atolls and in the Tokelau communities overseas are currently intertwined and this transnational field clearly includes political life in the atoll communities. In this sense, the analytical perspective associated with the single-location traditional community study is no longer applicable. The New Year statement also points to an important fact which is often hidden behind population figures that tend to link people to specific locations; i.e., that people who inhabit the various social spaces that constitute the Tokelau transnational community are transitory. They are highly mobile and are likely to continue to be so, moving in many directions.

The social networks that constitute the Tokelau community have expanded to become truly transnational. However, the size of the population and the manner

in which its patterns of sociality are constructed are such that the shapes and directions of peoples' life-trajectories are highly vulnerable to social conflict. In conclusion, I consider it likely that the issue of conflict resolution will have the possibly greatest impact on future patterns of migration (both to and from the atolls). How leadership handle conflict is intimately connected with its social legitimacy, and hence it greatly affects its social standing (*tulaga*), respect (*ava*) and its capacity to act (its *mana*).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork for this project was carried out in the periods January–February 2002, July–August 2003, October–January 2005-06, in Tokelau, Samoa and New Zealand, and was funded by the Norwegian Research Council.

<sup>2</sup> According to A. Hooper and J. Huntsman in Wessen et. al. (1992) the 'earliest reliable population estimates come from the records of the US Exploring Expedition', that is, from 1841. Since 1948, census data have been gathered regularly.

<sup>3</sup> This wish is, for example, clearly expressed in the 2007 New Year Message from the Council for the Ongoing Government of Tokelau (see <http://www.tokelau.org.nz/>).

<sup>4</sup> For a theoretical discussion and empirical applications of this concept, see Hoëm and Roalkvam 2003.