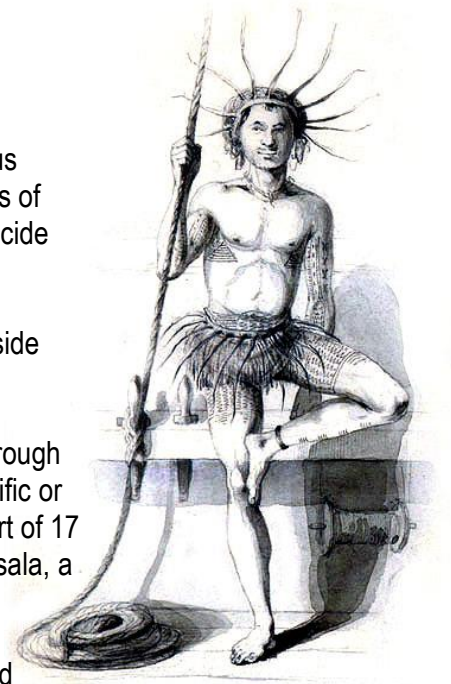


Tuvalu: A History – A Seminar

TUVALU: A HISTORY (published in 1983) is the most recent of a series of 'indigenous histories' jointly sponsored by the University of the South Pacific and the governments of island states of the southwest Pacific. Most of the books have been published to coincide with independence, or shortly after it; their purpose, at least in part, has been to put forward a 'national' view — here, as the Prime Minister of Tuvalu says, 'Tuvaluans interpreting events as they themselves see them' — as distinct from the views of outside observers. There has been a conscious effort to draw on oral tradition, and on the testimony of observers of, and participants in, more recent events of national or local importance. All of the books in this series have been collectively written — usually through workshops for local contributors with academics from the University of the South Pacific or Australasian universities as 'facilitators' and editors. Tuvalu: A History is the joint effort of 17 Tuvaluan writers and an academic support team of five led by Dr Hugh Laracy. Tito Isala, a Tuvaluan, was both a contributor and a member of the advisory team.

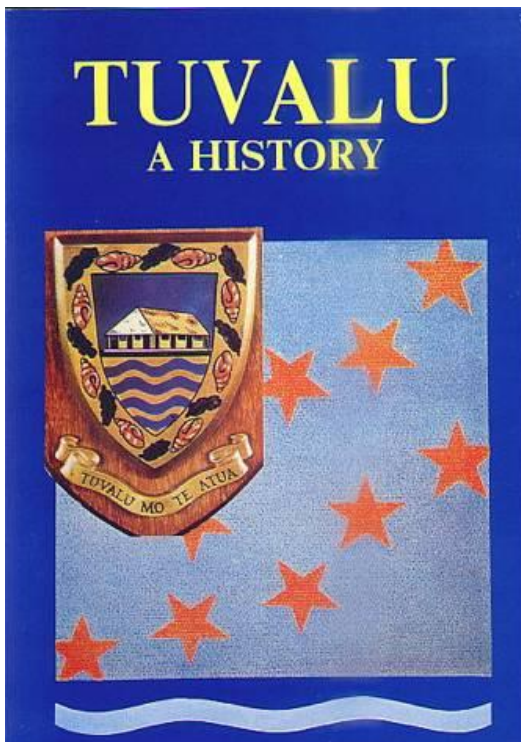


- Taken from a review by Barry MacDoanld, Massey University of New Zealand

1

GENESIS

Talakatoa O'Brien



Tuvalu's history was not recorded in a book until 1983 - how does the study of history deal with this?

Where did our Tuvalu people originate? Where did our ancestors come from? Such questions have long been asked by those of us who want to know where we stand and where we belong. Our traditions contain many highly imaginative answers which, even if they are not scientifically correct, are at least entertaining. Many a time when we were young our grandfathers or grandmothers related to us those very old stories of how the islands of Tuvalu originated, and about the people who inhabited them. But we often took little notice. Yet we must not forget them. We must record them and pass them on. For in those stories we can hear our ancestors still speaking to us. We can see the world, their world and ours, through their eyes.

Different islands often have different stories. In some places the people believed that the spirits of their great grandfathers were the creators of their islands. In other islands they believe that a woman who once lived in the moon was the creator. In most of the islands of Tuvalu people believed that *te Pusi mo te Ali* (the Eel and the Flounder) were the first creators of Tuvalu; and so strong is this belief that nearly all the islands regard *te Pusi* (the Eel) as a *tapu* among the many fish that are edible.

Writers from foreign countries have speculated and written about our origins, about what kind of people we are, and what we did in the past. These expert writers will always look at our past through the eyes of outsiders. Their view will not always be the same as that of the people of Tuvalu, which is why we should write our own history. The outsiders may live with us, and share many ideas with us but they can never feel quite the same about our culture and our traditions as we do.

Since creation stories are part of our traditions and the people of all the islands know the story *te Pusi mo te Ali* it is fitting that we record the

story at the beginning of this book. The Eel and the Flounder were once great friends. They lived in one home in the sea and shared things together. One day they made up their minds to carry home a very huge stone to test who was the stronger of them. On the way home, they began to argue, and then to fight. *Te Ali* (the Flounder) was seriously wounded. He was crushed underneath the stone. Fortunately he escaped death. When he had freed himself he chased *te Pusi* who at the same time was vomiting after getting a heavy blow to his stomach. As *te Pusi* ran for his life, still vomiting, his body became thinner and thinner. At last he hid himself in a hole. While *te Ali* was still looking for him *te Pusi* said some magic words to help him escape. He said:

Wide and Flat, Wide and Flat,
To feed on you, *te Ali*.
Wide and Flat, Wide and Flat,
You will never, never kill me.

When *te Pusi* had said these magic words *te Ali*'s body became flat, and so provided a model for the flat islands of Tuvalu that would one day be placed in that part of the sea. When *te Pusi* said that he would feed on *te Ali*, his own thin round body became like a coconut tree. That is why we have coconut trees growing on all the islands of Tuvalu.

Te Pusi then went back to the hole in the sea again but he was not satisfied with what he had done. So when *te Ali* died, he remembered the very big stone that they had carried. He decided to have a closer look at it. He saw that it had three colours: black, white and blue. He took the stone and threw it high in the air. It did not fall; but stuck in space right above him. Then he said his magic words:

Black, White and Blue,
I will always be true,
To myself and to you, too,
To make you and me friends.

The big stone then began to fall down slowly, silently, to the earth. When it landed *te Pusi* went to see the stone. He found to his surprise that much of the blue part of it had broken off and remained stuck in space. So the blue part left above became the sky. *Te Pusi* was very cross because the stone came down leaving its blue side behind. Angrily he took the stone, and again he threw it up to the sky. Again it stuck, on its black side this time. There was darkness all around him. It was night. So

te Pusi again said some magic words. When he had finished, the stone fell down onto its white side, this time breaking the darkness. And so the light came and there was day. He was then able to see that of the colours on the stone, the black and the white parts had been torn completely away, leaving only some of the blue part. Again he took the stone and threw it, in turn, to the North, East, South and West. After the last throw it did not come back. Again he uttered some magic words. He then looked about him and he saw parts of the blue stone lying all around. It was the sea. He then went to what was left of the stone and broke it into eight pieces, one for each of the main islands of Tuvalu. Now he no longer had anyone or anything to challenge so he went back to his permanent home in the sea, leaving our home as a monument to remind us of his exploits. The following lines are a statement of gratitude for the existence of Tuvalu:

Tuvalu for the Almighty,
I will stand for thee.
No gold or silver are mine,
But I will never mind,
You are good, gentle and kind.
At dawn the surf breaks in my ear.
I will always hear in it
Your voice, that calls on me
To honour you.

When the islands were made, people came to live on them. There is no single tradition about settlement. Stories about the first inhabitants vary from island to island. On Funafuti and Vaitupu, for instance, the founding ancestor is said to have been Telematua, a giant from Samoa, while on Nanumea it is said to have been Tefolaha from Tonga, who was part human and part spirit. Such a variety of stories probably indicates that the islands of Tuvalu were settled at various times by people from a number of different places. So, too, does the existence of three distinct linguistic areas in Tuvalu: a. Nanumea, Niutao, Nanumaga; b. Nui; c. Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Funafuti, Nukulaelae. In language as well as tradition, Tongan influence seems to have been stronger in the north than in the south. This is further suggested by the incidence of Tongan place names such as Hahake, Ha-tonga and Houma on Nanumea; and Haapai and Tongatapu on Nanumaga. Nevertheless, despite certain local variations, on all the islands of the group except Nui the language is virtually the same.

According to the evidence of linguists, who can work out how old a language is, and hence for how long people have been speaking it, the language of Tuvalu—and hence the settlement of the country—goes back about two thousand years. The traditional stories and genealogies, however, mostly go back only about 300 years. The oldest, those from Nanumea, go back 700 years. It seems, therefore, that the stories we have today came to us not from our very earliest ancestors, but from later arrivals in Tuvalu.

Where did our ancestors come from? Most of them came from Samoa, possibly by way of Tokelau, while others came from Tonga and Uvea (Wallis Island). These settlers were all Polynesians. In the northern islands, however, particularly in Nui, many people are also descendants of Micronesians from Kiribati. A likely indication of Tuvalu's links with Tokelau (and there are others) is found on Nanumea in the use there of the term *hauai* to describe the mythical beings Pai and Vau. *Hauai* is not a Tuvaluan word but was probably introduced from Tokelau, where it means 'women ogres' or 'female cannibal spirits'.

And where did the Polynesians come from? According to recent research by archaeologists, they are derived from the so-called Lapita people who came from South-East Asia and spread through Melanesia, from the eastern islands off the coast of New Guinea to New Caledonia, about 5000 years ago. Little is yet known about these people, who were but one of many groups populating Melanesia, apart from the facts that they produced pottery ornamented with distinctive tooth-shaped designs, and that they were very capable sailors. The name Lapita comes from a place in New Caledonia where a large deposit of their pottery was found. About 3,500 years ago some of the Lapita people went from Vanuatu to Fiji, and from there to Tonga and Samoa. We know this because some of their pottery has been found among the remains of the earliest settlers in those islands. Later, the people in Fiji were joined by other settlers from Vanuatu, but those in Tonga and Samoa were left alone to evolve in their own way. There they developed the particular set of physical, social and linguistic features which marked them out as Polynesians. And from there they set out to settle the islands to the north, south and east, eventually coming to Tuvalu. Linguists can trace the movements of the Polynesian people by showing the relationships between their languages. Linguistic research also supports the findings of the archaeologists by relating the Polynesian languages to the vast family of Austronesian languages spoken in Melanesia.

Exactly why our ancestors began coming to Tuvalu about 2000 years

ago we do not know. Some may have been blown here by accident. Others may have come because of wars or famine in their home islands, while others came in search of adventure. They travelled before the south-east winds in large sailing canoes, possibly navigating by the sun and the stars and observing wave patterns and birds to direct themselves towards land. It would have been a hard journey. When water was scarce they may have drunk *bonitos'* blood. Many voyagers may have died on the way. But the survivors, though coming from lands with rich soil, adapted to life on coral atolls. They became Tuvaluan.

Sometimes they may have thought of their former homes in words such as these:

Over the seas and beyond I lived,
Days that are numbered and gone.
I see the moon, the sun, the stars
That could guide me to lands afar.
Memory brings to mind,
The home I left behind.

Tuvalu is a chain, 580 kilometres long, of nine coral islands lying between five and eleven degrees south of the equator, just to the west of the International Date Line. Six of the islands are built around lagoons open to the ocean. They are Nanumea, Nui, Vaitupu, Nukufetau, Funafuti, and Nukulaelae. With the exception of Vaitupu, where the sea enters the lagoon at only one point, these six are all atolls consisting of numerous pieces of land linked by a reef and arranged rather like a string of beads. Of the other islands, Nanumaga and Niutao have completely landlocked lagoons while Niulakita has no lagoon at all, but only a swamp, at its centre. Since it has never had a permanent population Niulakita, the southernmost island, was not taken into account in the naming of the Tuvalu group. Tuvalu means 'group of eight'.

The modern explanation of how the islands of Tuvalu were formed is vastly different from the traditional one passed on from our ancestors. Yet it is no less dramatic and imaginative. The formation of coral islands was a topic of considerable scientific argument in the nineteenth century. The question that particularly bothered scientists was this: since corals grow only at shallow depths in the sea (not below eighty metres), how is it that coral rock, formed from their remains, often extends for hundreds of metres beneath the sea? In 1842 the famous scientist Charles Darwin, who visited the Pacific in 1835-6, put

forward the theory that coral islands had been built on slowly subsiding volcanic rocks. As the volcanic foundation sank it carried the dead coral down to greater depths. Meanwhile new deposits of coral were being added to the top of the pile, near the surface, so that the upward growth of the coral kept pace with the subsidence. At some later date another volcanic movement occurred, and pushed some of the coral up to form islands. Thus it was, said Darwin, that a solid mass of coral rock could be found above the surface of the sea, and extend from there, through the waters in which it had been formed down to depths at which the coral had never lived.

To test this theory it would be necessary to bore down into the coral and obtain samples of it from far beneath the surface to see if they contained traces of shallow water organisms. But scientists, quick to speculate and talk, were slow to act.

Finally, after many years of discussion on the structure of atolls, the Royal Society of London decided to take the matter in hand. In 1896 it sent an expedition led by a geologist named Professor W. J. Sollas to Funafuti to obtain samples of the material of which the island was made. Using machinery loaned by the Department of Mines in New South Wales, the scientists drilled far below the surface of the island. In 1896 they managed to bore to a depth of 33 metres. In 1897 another party of scientists led by Professor Edgeworth David of the University of Sydney carried the boring to a depth of 200 metres while the following year a third group obtained samples from 340 metres down. The 'cores' of coral rock thus obtained from deep within the island were then sent to a laboratory in London, where they were all found to contain traces of shallow water organisms. Funafuti thus earned itself a place on the scientific map of the world by supplying the evidence which showed Darwin's atoll theory to be correct. (It was, however, not until 1952, at Eniwetok in Micronesia, that scientists eventually drilled right through the coral structure and struck volcanic rock in a borehole in a Pacific atoll—at a depth of 1290 metres.) In other ways, too, members of the expedition helped make Funafuti more widely known. Mrs David wrote a popular book describing the island and its people, while a number of scientists, particularly Charles Hedley of the Australian Museum, also wrote detailed accounts of the people, plants and animals to be found there. Thus, as well as gathering much material of interest to scholars, the coral boring expedition produced for later generations of Tuvaluans a precious record of what part of our country was like at the end of the nineteenth century.