

## Chapter 13

### Commemorative Days and Celebrations

This chapter describes the special celebrations that enliven community life for Nanumeans. Some of the festivities, such as *Po o Tefolaha*, are unique to Nanumea. No other community in the entire world can claim Tefolaha as a founding ancestor. Other celebrations are shared with other Tuvalu communities, such as Women's Day or Children's Day. But they become infused with Nanumean traditions too. For example, *matuaofa* (the cousins of a child's father), who started a relationship at the time of the child's birth, take the main role in the Nanumean celebration of *Po Gātama*. And at all these celebrations, Nanumea's distinctive and fragrant *fau* becomes a mark of identity for participants.

#### **Big Days**

The celebration of "Big Days" (encompassing Christmas, New Year, the days of the Pototopotoga, and the Day of Tefolaha) begins on Christmas day with a morning church service, followed by a noon meal eaten in the āhiga. Families have prepared festive foods, usually including taro or pulaka dishes and pork or chicken, and enjoy a day of speeches and fātele entertainments. Community leaders plan a program of activities day by day for the following weeks, which may number from four to eight or nine, depending on people's enthusiasm and participation. A typical day's festive program usually includes tea at 8am in the āhiga, speeches by elders, followed by games in the adjacent playing field and card games inside the āhiga, a noon meal with more speeches, and more games in the afternoon. One day during this period is usually devoted to welcoming school children who have returned home for the holidays. The students of each village side are seated in the center of the āhiga and are fed lavishly with woven platters of food. They are also given instructive speeches about the value of education and the importance of studying hard. The student spokespersons thank the elders, and provide news from the prior school year for all to hear.

The "Big Days" routine of daily (4-6 times per week) tea, noon meals, and games continues on. If the season is a good one, the energy and intensity in the speeches, inside play, and especially the colorful Nanumean game of "ano" builds as the weeks goes on. Side rivalry fuels the play, and leads each side to wear colorful (and ever changing) costumes and to provide fish to enhance the noon meals. Increasingly, the ano itself becomes a focus, if

energy is high. The major events of Big Days are described below, and Ano itself is discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 14).

### **New Year Festivities**

The New Year is ushered in with a church service conducted by the pastor at midnight on the eve of the New Year. Following this groups of young people visit village houses singing fātele and other songs. Households respond by giving small food gifts or by powdering and perfuming the group. This “aisiga” or serenading may go on until dawn.

### **Days of the Potopotoga**

The first days of the new year are the days of the four Potopotoga groups. Beginning the evening of January 2, each group has a turn to lead an evening church service and to host the entertainments for the next day in the āhiga. Their order goes in rotation so a different group begins the “ladder” each year. Each group tries to climb higher on the ladder, to donate more, than the previous group did. These donations are given to the pastor for his personal use, and are in addition to the customary donations made by each island to its Tuvalu Christian Church pastor each August. The size of the potopotoga donations can vary greatly. For example, in 2004 the smallest gift was \$2,815 and the largest was \$14,000 (for a total 2004 gift of over \$30,000). The potopotoga groups plan a variety of fundraising events during the year, knowing that they will need to work hard to generate their gift. Fundraising events include auctions, kapotaeka, sales of items such as plates of food, in addition to a levy on each household of several hundred dollars. Overseas relatives are also asked to contribute. The size of the donation to be made by each group is a closely guarded secret, revealed only, and with great drama (and often humour) by the woman who leads the group at the end of its evening church service.

At the potopotoga church services the members of the group leading the service sit in the front pews (on the left in 2004), dressed all in white, with white head wreaths and usually some other potopotoga insignia. They sing the hymns, provide 3-4 prayers divided into parts, and select 3-4 members each to give a short sermon on a topic selected for them by the pastor. The service ends with the takitaki (or kāpeni or pailate) of the potopotoga announcing in a dramatic and humorous way the amount it is donating to the pastor, holding up the envelope for all to see.

The following day, that potopotoga also organizes the entertainment to follow the noon feast in the āhiga. Sometimes the members prepare laulau with delicacies and feed the

elders at their posts in addition to feeding themselves. The entertainments vary day by day, and may include games outdoors, performance of a song by each post or group in the āhiga, siva or “twist” dances, “lulu lima” and fakatalofa of all to each other, and (in 2004), a “Misi” beauty contest done humorously. The fun is increased because the potopotoga do not usually reveal their entertainment program long in advance.

### **The Day of Tefolaha**

The Day of Tefolaha (*Te Po o Tefolaha*) started in 1922, at the time of the “Golden Jubilee” celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the coming of the Gospel to Nanumea. The Pastor at that time, Peniata, thought that this day should be commemorated. But it was difficult to fulfil that plan because quite a few people were still worshipping the island’s traditional gods, including Tefolaha himself.

The Pastor and those who were already Christian wanted to celebrate the day of the Jubilee as an island wide occasion that commemorated the overthrow of the old gods. Eventually they were able to do this. People say that this is what happened. A group of Nanumeans who had converted to Christianity was going house to house singing hymns, and trying to convince those who still worshipped the old gods to give them up. Peni was an elder who headed one of these non-Christian families. As the sound of the hymn singing moved from house to house in the village, Peni finally agreed to convert, and his family with him. Peni’s relatives accepted his decision, but they all cried at the thought of putting aside their family gods. Since Peni’s extended family made up most of the pagan group still on Nanumea, this conversion meant that virtually all of Nanumea was now Christian.

In celebration an island-wide feast was held in the āhiga and there was dancing which continued on for the whole night. Later, a cement monument was erected near the āhiga to commemorate this important day. The connection of this holiday with the church is further emphasized by the organization of the island into four potopotoga groups during this holiday, not the usual division into two “sides.” As is explained in Chapter 5, these groups were formed in the 1930’s during the construction of the foundation for the community’s new (and current) church, Loto Lelei. The four work groups carried stones and made the lime cement for the foundation and walls. They took on names that are still used today: Usitai, Vakalele, Lesili and Kalofia.<sup>1</sup> Another church-related aspect of the Po o Tefolaha holiday is the

<sup>1</sup> Nanumeans discussed the origin of these names in the āhiga in January 2004. Three of the names are from the Samoan language. Usitai means “obedient.” Lesili means either “the winner” or “never wins” depending on pronunciation. Kalofia, “pitiful” refers to the fact that the original group’s leader was unmarried. Vakalele,

opening of the pastor's books for any community members who wish to be appointed to volunteer positions within the congregation (deacon, choir member, Sunday school teacher, lay preacher, etc). They can go to the pastor's office during the night to sign up for the positions they are interested in.

This commemoration is celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January each year. It has come to be known as the Day of Tefolaha, since he was the father of the Nanumean people and they worshipped him as a god. Though Tefolaha would no longer be worshipped by Nanumeans, he remained as an important figure for all Nanumeans, the founder of their society and its most important symbol. Attaching his name to this day reminds Nanumeans of the historic past as well as the day on which all the descendants of Tefolaha embraced Christianity.

Several decades later, the Samoan Pastor Iosefa suggested that the name of this day should be changed from the Day of Tefolaha to Aso Pati, "Pati Day," taking its meaning from the words "Day of Pentecost of the Children of Tefolaha for Jesus" [Aso Pentekoso Alo Tamaliki o Tefolaha mo Iesu]. Pati was also the name of one of the children of Iosefa. While some people, especially non-Nanumeans, use the term Aso Pati, the majority of Nanumeans prefer to use their own term for this important holiday, "Tefolaha's Day," *te Po o Tefolaha*. In response to the government's request that each island choose an annual holiday, Nanumeans made the **Day of Tefolaha** their national holiday. The holiday is celebrated on Nanumea and by Nanumeans in Funafuti and wherever they reside, even in overseas countries such as Australia.

One important part of the *Po o Tefolaha* celebration is the "Putu Lama" (short torch). In the Putu Lama tradition, while the island is dancing through the night, elders go around asking the young unmarried men who their sweethearts are, and trying to coax them to propose marriage. If a young man agrees to "light his putu-lama" the elders take the proposal for them to the **girl** and, if she accepts, to the families of each. If all agree, the wedding celebrations will **be** hosted by the whole community in the *āhiga* a few days later.<sup>2</sup> Often, several marriages result from the work of the elders on this night. Elders say that the putu

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"airplane" is interpreted as referring to this group's intention to fly higher and be more successful than any other *potopotoga*.

<sup>2</sup> Some elders say that the Putu Lama tradition began at the time of the first Day of Tefolaha. Elders who went around urging couples to marry were encouraging them to make a Christian-style marriage commitment, seen as moving beyond traditional practices whereby a man could have more than one wife and where some couples lived together without formalities, practices that are now considered of the "dark ages." The "short torch" name also refers to the fact that normally a couple needed to register their intention to marry and then wait three months – the "long" torch or lama. People today also say that marriage helps a young man make something useful of his life, parallel in a way to being useful to the church through taking on a church position (*tofi*).

lama type of marriage was adopted by some other Tuvalu islands after 1939. Men who had been sent to Nanumea to await the recruiting ship from Banaba (Nanumea was the northern recruiting center) were delayed on Nanumea when the Japanese invaded Banaba. They participated in the Big Days festivities and took the putu lama custom home with them.

Another important part of the Tefolaha celebration is called *solo*, literally "lining up." As the faatele dancing begins, a table is set up in the centre of the āhiga on the ocean side. Two plates, one for each faatele group, are placed on the table and a cashier takes charge of each of them, making change for the soloists. After each round of faatele, all the dancers and any others who wish to join in file past the table, dropping in their small coins (from 2 to 20 cents is normal) into the plate of the faatele side they are part of. Then all the dancers dance together on the other side for the next round of faatele. Once this round is done, they again file past the table and drop in their coins, and regroup on the other side to dance again. The two "sides" for this all night event are each composed of two of the potopotoga groups. Vakalele and Usitai sit at the end of the building usually occupied by Haumaefa, while Lesili and Kalofia sit on the end normally occupied by Lolua. Thus, on this night the seating in the ahiga continues the potopotoga seating that has been used since the midnight church service on New Year's eve. About each hour during the all-night dance the amount contributed by each side (Usitai and Vakalele make one side, Lesili and Kalofia the other) is read out, to cheers of the side supporters. The money donated this night (usually several hundred dollars) goes to the fund supporting the island's church building.

The dancers on Tefolaha's Day should all wear *titi fakamanumanu* coconut and pulaka leaf dance skirts and *lākei* decorations (*manogi*) consisting of *fau* head wreaths and other leaf garlands, *titi vao*. Families often coordinate their dress by sewing new matching outfits of the same cloth or dressing with a colour theme. The number of dancers can swell to nearly 200 at a time, making a very exuberant scene, with only the very old and the young children sitting at the sides watching. The all-night fātele celebration of the Day of Tefolaha is the most exciting event held each year in the āhiga. It is something that people remember and talk about from year to year.

### **Community Fund Celebration**

Nanumea was the first community in Tuvalu to establish a fund requiring a standard contribution from people working overseas, beginning with those who went to work in Banaba and Nauru. This collection of money for the community began just after World War