

# Origins, Customs and Identity of Nanumea



New Revised Draft  
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## Introduction

This book is a work by and for all the people of Nanumea, wherever they live today. It has come into being as a Nanumean project as one of the many reactions to the far-reaching changes that have affected the island of Nanumea and Nanumeans since our initial contact with Europeans in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. These changes were minimal at first, but gained speed once London Missionary Society pastors reached us in the 1870's. The rate of change accelerated again with the coming of the British colonial government in 1892, creating increased work opportunities overseas from about 1900 on. Other factors which brought opportunities and further changes to life in Nanumea and Tuvalu included World War II (with thousands of Americans living in Nanumea, Funafuti and Nukufetau in the 1940's), the establishment of radio networks reaching to all the outer islands, and of course independence from Britain in 1978. Since independence, Funafuti has grown to house half the Tuvalu population, and is a lively Pacific port town, a focus for change, and our connection to the outside world.

Today, all of Tuvalu stands on the brink of ever further-reaching changes, as all countries of the world become more closely linked by trade and by aid agreements, as telephone and internet services reach even our most distant islands, and as shipping and air services become more frequent. There are Tuvaluans and Nanumeans living and working on ships which sail all the world's oceans, and in many of the countries of the world. Nanumeans are being educated abroad, with many of them now receiving university qualifications. Tuvalu has joined the United Nations, and is thus a voting member of the most important world body.

All this change has come at a cost to Nanumeans and to other Tuvaluans. We all know that Nanumean culture and traditions have changed radically in the 150 years since foreign contacts began. We see our children wanting to eat mostly European or other foreign food. Some of them grow up not even liking to eat the famous *pulaka* and coconuts of their ancestors. Traditional customs, even wedding traditions and family relationships, are changing. We live in a different world, one in which earning money becomes more important for some than participation in our traditions. Our fishing and other traditional canoes, famous for their sophistication, are seldom built or used anymore. Cool thatched houses are mainly a thing of the past, as Nanumeans choose increasingly to build houses more similar to those seen overseas. The population of Nanumeans living in Funafuti is

almost as large as the population on Nanumea itself. And we all know of Nanumeans who live permanently in New Zealand, Australia or other places even further away whose children who do not speak Tuvaluan.

### **Recording the Traditions of Nanumea**

Over the years, as our culture and traditions changed and we adapted more and more to outside influences, there were occasional foreigners who were interested in Nanumean culture and history. There are many records left by them, and some of these are listed in the “Annotated Bibliography” at the end of this book. Whaling ship captains, British LMS missionaries, Samoan LMS missionaries, traders, government officials, and other visitors too, produced these writings, usually as short accounts of their experiences. Taken as a whole, these records give us a very valuable set of early information about our ancestors. Though many of these writers understood very little about us, and most did not speak our language, they possessed the valuable art of writing and used this to make notes on aspects of our life and culture. Many of these early records are mentioned below and information from them has been included here where appropriate.

It is important to note, too, that our ancestors were quick to recognize the value of recording traditional history once they learned the new skills of reading and writing. By about 1900 many family were using a ledger book to record important family knowledge, genealogies, and especially their line of descent from Tefolaha, the founding ancestor of Nanumea.

More recently, two American social anthropologists lived in Nanumea (and also visited all the other islands of Tuvalu for shorter periods). Keith and Anne Chambers (Kiti mo Ane) first lived in Nanumea from June 1973 to January 1975, researching many aspects of our life and traditions. Several works were written after that period with us, including Anne’s *Nanumea Report*. Kiti and Ane returned again to Nanumea from December 1983 to June 1984, this time with their two young daughters, Lorien (Nonu) and Claire. After this period of work in Nanumea, the Chambers published Keith’s thesis, *Heirs of Tefolaha*, which is mainly about traditional culture and politics, and also a study by Anne of childbirth practices. In carrying out all of this early research, the Chambers worked with many elders and experts, both men and women, some of whom were born in the late 1800’s.

The Chambers returned again to Nanumea with their children (now including their young son, David) for several months in mid-1996. On this visit they brought along copies of genealogical charts tracing the descent lines of as many Nanumean families as they had

information for. One copy of these charts was left in Nanumea, and a second copy was placed in the National Library in Funafuti. Not long after this, in 2001, the Chambers published their study of Nanumea, *Unity of Heart*.

As the Chambers continued to return and do research in Nanumea, and to return copies of their publications about us, the importance of this type of research became clearer to people. We realized that with the passing of the older generations, parts of our precious cultural heritage were not being passed on. Our experience of rapid changes in the past few decades has also increased our interest in writing down and preserving knowledge about our own culture. This interest is especially strong among the Nanumeans who live in urban Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu. It was the Nanu-Futi community which initially conceived the idea of this cultural handbook project, and began to move the project forward toward becoming a reality.

This project, to collect materials and write a sort of “Cultural Handbook” on the customs and traditions of Nanumea, began in Funafuti in 1993. At the Nanu-Futi monthly meeting of March 1993, Tangisia Kilei, then the elected leader of the community, proposed as a project the preparation of an overview of Nanumean tradition and custom. The idea was to produce a book which recorded as much information as possible about the community of Nanumea. The following were to be included:

- the origin of the Nanumeans
- customs of the āhiga and organization of the chieftainship
- island-wide customs and traditions
- resources and their traditional uses
- and other related topics

This proposal was accepted by the community and a questionnaire covering these topics was quickly prepared to send to the elders of Nanumea. For many of these questions replies were received, but for others, including issues to do with Nanumea’s chieftainship, there were no replies since these were disputed issues. Reminders were sent, but the lukewarm response from Nanumea continued. At that time Nanumea was still in some disarray regarding its traditional political system. Despite these difficulties, Nanu-Futi persevered with discussion of topics that should be included in the book.

Tagisia Kilei played an important role in this process. He began to write down notes and later compiled these to create a manuscript to serve as a first draft. The Nanu-Futi community asked that Keith and Anne come to assist with the project. These two agreed willingly to return and to work with people in Nanumea as well with the Nanumean

communities in Funafuti, Suva and in New Zealand if possible. They planned to arrive in October, 2002 but due to unforeseen circumstances, had to postpone their visit for a year. Keith and Anne arrived in Funafuti in September 2003 with their teenaged son, David. From their arrival until December, 2003, Keith and Anne worked closely with Tangisia Kilei to revise and augment the provisional draft. This revised draft was circulated to Nanu-Futi elders and a copy was sent to Suva in mid December. From just before Christmas 2003 to late January 2004, Keith and Anne worked in Nanumea with elders and community groups to add material and correct information already in draft form and to translate in both directions to ensure that equal books, one in Nanumean, one in English, were the result. An important part of this process in Nanumea was having elders make sure that the language used in the book was truly Nanumean.

During the time Keith and Anne were in Nanumea, Tangisia Kilei continued gathering comments from Nanu-Futi readers and also continued with translation of some sections into Tuvaluan. Keith and Anne returned to Funafuti at the end of January and the “New Draft” was finalized in the first week of February, incorporating comments from as many readers as possible.

Many people have helped with this project. In addition to both Nanumean communities as a whole (in Nanumea and in Funafuti), we would like to thank the following people who provided special assistance.

In Funafuti we thank: the Taipola of the Nanu-Futi community and participants at monthly meetings. Maatia and Pula Toafa and their household for hosting David, Anne and Keith in their home. Seinati and Willy Telavi for creative advice and patient work in translating Chapter 4. Pula Maatia Toafa for her help with Chapters 13 and 15, Teuleala Manuela for consulting on Chapters 5 and 6, and Lily Tangisia Faavae for help with Chapter 6. And finally, Amuia Tapeva for his generous and cheerful support with the many logistical details of this project.

In Nanumea we thank: The Pule Fenua and Council of Chiefs, as well as the Council President and Council. The leaders and people of the two village sides, Lolua and Haumaefa and the representatives they selected to work on this project with us, Peue Nakala and Iona Malesa, Nemia Sakalia, and Laina Teuea. For help with proofreading and correcting chapters: Lolesi Samuelu, Tināmoe Lolesi, Soke Samuelu, Faiva Tovia, Falaile Pilitati, Eli Teuea, Laina Teuea, Siki Katoa. For advice on sections of the book or contribution of family traditions: Lauti Malaki, Eseta Pelesese, Faiva Tovia, Peue Nakala, Hinota Viliamu, Patea Sela. And for hard work in translating: Ataieta Iafeta, Senialofa Fakalupe, Tie Maheu and

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Clearly, this book has been the work of many people and contains the collected knowledge of Nanumea. We three who have pushed the project forward are simply the “workers in the field” whose energy has, we hope, helped to make the book one that Nanumeans will be proud of and make use of. Careful readers will find many areas which remain incomplete or which are not yet included in the book. Hopefully, Nanumeans will take the time to comment and make suggestions for improvements so that an improved version can be produced in the future. We ourselves apologize in advance for any errors or misunderstandings we may have incorporated here and for any omissions of material. These shortcomings are ours, although they are inadvertent.

Thank you very much!

Anne Chambers  
Keith Chambers  
Tangisia Kilei

Funafuti, February 4, 2004

## Borrowed Words, Nanumean Words

In this short section we list some of the many words in common use by Nanumeans today which are borrowings from the southern Tuvalu dialects, or from Samoan. For most of these words there are perfectly good Nanumean equivalents, and we have provided these Nanumean words, with the suggestion that they be used by Nanumeans where possible. As the saying goes, we all need to “use it, or lose it!”

We have tried to follow this saying in this book, using these Nanumean words in many cases in preference to borrowed words. Of course, there will always be borrowings – language is a living thing and it must grow and change. Our goal here is educational, to point out to all Nanumeans how many of their own words are being set aside and not used today. Instead, many of us are substituting borrowed words, as more and more Nanumeans live in the capital or abroad and interact with and marry people from other parts of Tuvalu.

Here is our list. This is a work in progress, and we ask your help in adding to it.

Words from Southern Tuvaluan or from  
Samoan -- try not to use:

True Nanumean words  
to use instead:

---

aganū	faiga, faifaiga
aofia	kau i ai, kau i te, ‘to mai...
auā	i te mea, ko te mea
aunoa (without)	hē ai
fakaholopito	tala mua, tala fakaholo
fakapitoa	tāua, fakapatino, fakatino, fakautū,
fakatusa	fakapau, fakahoa
fale sā	fale tapu
fānau (mo fānau a Nanumea i Suva...)	gātama (gātama a Nanumea i Suva...)
fesoasoani	ok, but luani can also be used
fua (pau fua!)	ailoa
hē taumate	one can also use hēmotuhia
io, io me	ia, me
isi	i ai
ka (future tense)	koa
kami	ami
kani fai	mana fai
kāti (lā)	atu (lā)
kehekehe	ok, but sometimes hekeheke is better
ko (ko olo lātou)	koa

koga	momea
lauiloa	takutakua, koa iloa tonu
laulau	kautali
maea	koa oti ailoa, koa katoa (tonu?)
mafai	ok, but also kau maua, e ke maua, na maua, lā maua, etc
mailoga	can be used, if the meaning is “singd out, marked out:’ but one can use also pēlā lā, tafahili ko pēlā hoki, pēlā lā, tafaga atu lā mailoga i ai... fakamānava
maise (pēlā lā)	ok, but also mafi can be used
maise (especially)	mana
malōlō	ok, but fia fai may also be used
mālosi	atu lā or other construction
mani	iloa, iloa tonu
manako	lua, ni lua [a couple of...]
mata (mai mua i he fesili)	e (e iloa e koulua)
mautinoa	ni (aku <u>ni</u> fano)
nai, ni nai	omit, not needed, or ni, or ake
ne	example, i nisi fenua = i fenua fakaatea, fenua ake
ne	me ko, or other construction
nisi	pō nei
ona ko	taua, o’mai faka ‘poi, , etc.
ona pō nei	haga
osofai	fakatino
panaki	putukau
panaki	tonu
patino	hē tonu
potukau	omit, no word usually needed
sao	ake (tino ake...)
‘se	mua
sose	atafai, atafaiga
suā (suā tino...)	tona or tana, never tena
taumua (mea taumua)	kautali
tausī, tausiga	use another construction, no Nanumea word that we know means this
tena	haga, pologa, galuega
tifa	usually faiga, faifaiga
tigā	kainaga, tufaga
tiute	omit, no other word usually needed
tū (as in “custom,” tū mo aganū)	he pologa, galuega
tulaga (donation)	kainaga
tusa (e tusa mo toko tolu tino ni olo...)	hau
tusaga (tofi)	usually ok, but tufaga can be used for “share”
tusaga (donation, e.g. to church)	nā
ui	
vaega	
vagana, vaegana	