

# **A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN NUKULAEAE, TUVALU**

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by

Moeava Mausalii

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is focused on the history of the arrival of Christianity on the Island of Nukulaelae in Tuvalu. The paper would analyse the written history that was written by different authors and then shift to our island oral history that was not documented. Our oral stories that were passed down from our ancestors throughout many generations provided much more details about Elekana and our local people who accepted Elekana and his crew members. Likewise some other important people like Kafoa and Te'valu in our history which was not documented.

## DECLARATION

I declare that this work has not used without due acknowledgment of any material that has been previously submitted for a degree or diploma in another institution. I also declare that the work has not used any material, heard or read, without proper acknowledgment of the source.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **DEDICATION**

This Thesis is humbly dedicated to my late biological parents who are now my guardian angels; Mother SULULAGI. TALOSIA and Father TALOSIA. MOEAVA for they hold a special place in my heart - may their souls rest in love.

To my hero, my father who raised me with all his might despite the hardships of looking after the whole Kaiga late MAUSALII. KAITU. You will never be forgotten. Rest easy in God's loving arms.

I am also honoured and humble to dedicate this Thesis to the people of Nukulaelae Island around the globe and of course back at home who are continuing to grow Spiritually and maintaining their strong faith in God. May God continue to help our people to focus on our calling as Muaimalae and spread the Gospel to all who need it.

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## List of Illustrations

Figure 1:                      Map of Tuvalu and Nukulaelae



## **List of Abbreviations**

<b>EFKS</b>	Ekalesia Faapotopotoga kerisiano Samoa
<b>EKT</b>	Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu
<b>LMS</b>	London Missionary Society

## INTRODUCTION

The history of how Christianity arrived into Nukulaelae, Tuvalu is documented in written accounts, which are predominantly European/Caucasian in authorship, as well as its witnesses. Written accounts may appear to be the more popular choice of historical study from those interested in this topic, as it is generally in historical study itself. However, despite written accounts having an apparent permanence and impact in recording historical findings, there will always be an issue in relation to the bias of the historian, especially when they are not of the local populace, who bring in their own preconceptions about a place whom they are foreign to. This is especially the case with the European written accounts of history in relation to my island, Nukulaelae, Tuvalu.

This paper will address not only the written accounts of my island's history of Christianity, but also the oral accounts based on traditions passed down from generation to generation from the local Nukulaelae populace, who are mainly leaders and elders within the community.

The approach of this paper will analyse the written accounts first, which will then be compared to the oral traditions for the purposes of finding similarities and differences. Both of these accounts will then be amalgamated together to see how they can complement each other so that the Nukulaelae history of Christianity can be given more justice in presenting a more complete and wholistic record of history.

The paper has three chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the arrival of Christianity in Nukulaelae from written historical accounts. Chapter 2 will then discuss the same

historical accounts but from local oral tradition. And then lastly in Chapter 3, amalgamating both historical accounts to provide an overall wholistic record of the history of Christianity in Nukulaelae.

**Figure 1:** Map of Tuvalu (left) and Nukulaelae (right) (not to scale)

## Early Europeans and Christianity

The introduction of Christianity to Tuvalu is mostly accredited to Elekana, a deacon From Cook Islands. However, people had already heard about the Christian God before Elekana's arrival. According to Doug Munro, "the first bearers of the Christian message were not missionaries but coconut oil traders" in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, more traders and occasional labor recruiters frequently travelled to Tuvalu. Laumua Kofe on the contrary, claims that early Europeans who were called beachcombers who arrived before the oil traders could have been the ones responsible for initiating discussion about the Christian God.<sup>2</sup> He claims that the oil trading began around 1860, but an American Charles Wilkes who arrived at Funafuti in 1841, heard the people already talk about the Christian God.<sup>3</sup> In one of the cases he states:

In certain cases the traders even became religious teachers. Some, like Bob Waters on Nui, probably did so as an aid to business; he was able to acquire coconut oil by fining those who broke the Christian laws which he taught. Other like O'Brien, did it because it was the religion of their culture. [...] Thus as early as 1856, under the influence of a visiting trading captain named Stewart, the people of Nukulaelae destroyed their idols and then settled down to wait for a missionary whom they were assured to come.<sup>4</sup>

This shows that while these Europeans searched for a better way of life elsewhere from their homes, they carried their beliefs and their religion with them, and had shared it with their hosts. And it explains why Wilkes heard the locals talk about the Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Doug Munroe, *The Lagoon Islands: A History of Tuvalu, 1820 - 1908*, Macquarie University: Sydney, 1982, 85.

<sup>2</sup> Laumua Kofe, "Palagi and Pastors", in *Tuvalu: A History*, ed. Larcy Hugh, Institute of Pacific Studies: USP and Government of Tuvalu, 1987, 102-120.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 106.

God. This paved the way for the formal introduction of Christianity later, and as we will find out, the reason why Christianity was easily accepted in Tuvalu.

### **Black birding**

The people's friendliness to strangers and their eagerness to hear more about this Christian God could be reasons behind a dark period in the history of Tuvalu in the 1860's when slavers practicing black-birding "raided the southern islands in 1863 [...] to obtain slaves for laboring in the guano mines of Peru.<sup>5</sup>" These people, led by a man named Tom Rose started their cruel doing from the south and the first island they visited was Nukulaelae. According to Kofe, 250 were taken from Nukulaelae, and only 65 people were left on the island; while in Funafuti, 171 were taken and 146 were left.<sup>6</sup> Murray, as recalled by Kofe, wrote:

The people flocked on board the ships. Those who could not obtain passages in boats from the vessels went in canoes, and others swam; so great was their eagerness to be taught about God.<sup>7</sup>

It was obvious that the people were tricked into going into these ships, thinking that they are going to be taught more about the Christian God. Sadly, others used it to fulfill their greedy and evil intentions.

### **The Island of Nukulaelae before the Arrival of Christianity**

Nukulaelae means 'land of sand' or 'barren land.'<sup>8</sup> The people of Nukulaelae used to worship a god named Tevalu according to Vaieli Tinilau. A place called *Faleatua*

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<sup>5</sup> Kofe, "Palagi and Pastors", 107.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

which means ‘god’s place’ was used for worship. The people used huge rocks to place every first born boy child in the family, to be sacrificed to this half man half God Tevalu. According to Tinilau, prior to the arrival of Elekana in Nukulaelae, an old woman by the name of Kafoa used to go swimming in the lagoon and prophesized:

*E o mai, ate mea tela e vau mai ko  
E miomio kae malapulapu mai  
A tena malosi e vau mai sua taliga o fano ki sua taliga  
Talofa la ia tatou mana oko mai  
E o mai.*

This can be translated as:

*Something is coming from the horizon,  
When it comes it is good for each and all of us to listen to it and really  
take it into your hearts,  
But as for the idols and magic, something will happen to them.*

This prophecy served as a warning or a prophecy to prepare the people for the arrival of the Christian message, that will change the lives of the people for the better. This prophecy also convinced the people that the great news that was coming beyond the horizon was much more powerful than the idols and black magic that they had.

This prophecy could have been fulfilled when Christianity was officially introduced to Nukulaelae. It was first by Elekana, a deacon from Manihiki in the Cook Islands who arrived on the 10<sup>th</sup> of May 1861. Elekana was part of a crew on a boat that was blown off-course from its voyage from Manihiki to Rakahanga, and they landed on the reefs of Nukulaelae. The high Chief was told about the boat and its crew, and he sent his bodyguards to find out their motive. The report came back that the crew members were harmless, and the people should not have anything to worry about. The

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<sup>8</sup> Vaieli Tinilau, “Nukulaelae”, ed. *Hugh Laracy, Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and Extension Services, University of the South Pacific, 1987, 97.*

people then formally greeted them and gave them food. Once Elekana gained strength, he then started to preach the good news to the people. Kofe states that:

[Elekana] discovered that no mission had reached Nukulaelae, so he proceeded to instruct the people about the Christian God. Prior to that he had consulted the chief, who was delighted at the new teaching and offered to help in any way possible. Elekana began by teaching them his language, which was similar to Tuvaluan and easily picked up by the islanders. He found them anxious to learn from him, and many left their old religion to become faithful adherents of Christianity.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the power of the Holy Spirit was also helping Elekana. The locals were readily eager to learn about the new religion. According to Tinilau, high Chief Tafalagilua was converted and the moment he accepted the new religion from Elekana, he then removed his *Pakaso* (Chiefly Necklace) which symbolized power over his people. He knew that there was now a great God that everyone must obey even himself despite being the island's High Chief.

Although Michael Goldsmith and Doug Munroe stated in their article "Conversion and Church Formation in Tuvalu", that "Tuvalu began its formal association with Protestantism in 1865,<sup>10</sup>" they later stated that:

In 1961, the then Ellice Islands Church celebrated the centenary of the coming of the gospel. In one sense the date is correct, as 1861 marked the arrival of the first LMS teacher on the island group: Elekana, a deacon from Manihiki in the northern Cook Islands.<sup>11</sup>

The recognition of 1961 as the official arrival date of Christianity in Tuvalu can also be seen as a recognition of our Pacific Island people who had labored to spread the

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<sup>9</sup> Kofe, "Palagi and Pastors," 110.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Goldsmith and Doug Munroe, "Conversion and Church Formation in Tuvalu", *The Journal of Pacific History*, 27, 1 (1992), 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 45.



gospel throughout the Pacific. Despite the evangelization of Tuvalu in the 1860's,<sup>12</sup> the work was not complete as only the southern islands accepted Christianity. But there remain the three northern islands of Nanumea, Niutao and Nanumaga.

### **Samoan Missionaries and Christianity in Tuvalu**

Elekana did not stay long in Nukulaelae. He left to join the Theological College in Samoa in 1863.<sup>13</sup> Goldsmith and Munroe states that the reason for Elekana's early departure was, as he explained to the people, because he was not an ordained minister at the time, and he wished to be properly trained before returning to continue the missionary work that has been started.<sup>14</sup> Elekana's decision to receive proper training on the gospel also proved to be fruitful for Tuvalu as well. As Goldsmith and Munroe states:

Eventually [Elekana] made his way to Samoa where, having convinced the LMS missionaries based there that the islands of Tuvalu were clamoring for their attention, he attended the theological institute at Malua. In May 1865, by now an ordained pastor, he sailed to Tuvalu with Rev A.W.Murray and two Samoan teachers on the German trading vessel *Augustita*.<sup>15</sup>

According to Goldsmith and Munroe:

Tuvalu began its formal association with Protestantism in 1865 as an outpost of LMS enterprise Samoa. By that time LMS operations in the Pacific were organised from a number of permanent mission stations (or District Committees) under the oversight of a handful of European missionaries [...]. Tuvalu fitted into the LMS scheme of things as part of the Northwest Outstations of the Samoan District Committee, and the thrust of Evangelisation was left to the mainly Samoan teachers and pastors whom the LMS stationed on each island.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> According to Goldsmith and Munroe, other religions that came much later included Seventh Day Adventist, Jehovah's Witness, Baha'i, Mormons, and Catholics, 44.

<sup>13</sup>Kofe, "Palagi and Pastors" 110.

<sup>14</sup> Goldsmith and Munroe, "Conversion and Church Formation in Tuvalu," 46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 44.

In essence, the success of the evangelization of Tuvalu rested on the Samoan teachers. The Samoan missionaries used their own language to teach the people to read the Samoan Bible and sing hymns. A possible reason for this could be that the Samoan and Tuvaluan languages both belong to a group of Polynesian languages, therefore should have similarities that make it recognizable to each other.<sup>17</sup>

The use of the Samoan language by the Samoan Missionaries proved to be a useful tool in spreading the Christian message to the Tuvaluans. This claim is supported by Feleterika Nokise, who stated that one of the main factors that have made the work of these Samoan missionaries so successful in teaching the indigenous people about Christianity was the fact that they used their language and adapted their culture to interpret and comprehend Christianity to the indigenous people.<sup>18</sup> Thus, there was a consistency in the message of the missionaries not only in Tuvalu but also across the Pacific where Samoan Missionaries worked.<sup>19</sup>

Nokise further explained that, the Samoan missionaries were so committed to their work in spreading the Good news across Tuvalu and other Pacific Islands that they spent so many years away from Samoa and their family.

The rich culture of the Samoan people and their strong religious beliefs in serving people were the main values that motivated them to do their best in where ever they were spreading the Christian message. They worked tirelessly

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<sup>17</sup>Thus, people in Nukulaelae speak fluently in Samoa and to this very day they still have hymns in the Samoan language due to the influenced of the Samoan Missionaries.

<sup>18</sup> Uili Feleterika Nokise, "The Role of the London Missionary Society: Samoan Missionaries in the Evangelisation of the South West Pacific 1839-1930," (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Australian National University, 1983), 136 – 145.

<sup>19</sup> According to Nokise, there were about 416 Samoans who went on a mission as agents of the London Missionary Society (LMS) to work in converting indigenous people from the following places: Rotuma, New Hebrides, Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia, Niue, Tokelau, Ellice Islands (Tuvalu), Southern Gilberts (Kiribati), Phoenix Island, Fiji (Suva and Levuka), Saipan and Papua New Guinea.

in educating the indigenous people how to read the Bible and also how to write. They conducted Sunday schools and organized youths and women fellowship groups which made things easier in teaching the Word of God to the local people.<sup>20</sup>

The Samoan Pastors had great influence in the organization of Churches and congregations in Tuvalu. Many of these Samoan influences have become part of their tradition. The Samoan Pastors and their wives taught local people not only their own language, but also the Samoan culture and traditional practices.<sup>21</sup> They also promoted a fear-for-God's-representatives mentality on the people. For instance, Munroe in restating Crawford said that "the Samoan pastors, who presented themselves as God's representatives on earth, were locally regarded as having the requisite knowledge to proceed with the correct rituals to meditate [the Lord's] bounty."<sup>22</sup> Despite this negative form of describing the Samoan pastors, the people of Tuvalu treated the pastors with the utmost respect for the work they were doing. As Nokise claims:

The Samoan missionaries also played a vital role in terms of formal education, as they brought about the idea of education to Tuvalu and many other Pacific Islands. Consequently, more local men were inspired and motivated to go to Samoa and study at their local Theological colleges to become Pastors. It shows how great the work of the Samoan missionaries in teaching the Gospel to the indigenous people, as fruits of their hard work are those locals inspired to become qualified Pastors. Thus, at the end of this Samoan missionary mission through the London Missionary Society, the locals took over the work which is continued today.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Nokise, "The Role of the London Missionary Society," 145.

<sup>21</sup> At Nukulaelae, many were able to read the Samoan Bible with fluency. At Funafuti, over fifty persons out of a population of little more than 100 had learned to read. A Sunday school had been started and a neat little Chapel had been built with seats, Venetian window and doors. At Nui, the people with few exceptions were clothed and the Sabbath was being observed in the most exemplary manner. Nokise, U.F,1983,145pg.

<sup>22</sup> Doug Munroe, "Samoan Pastors in Tuvalu," in *Covenant Makers: Islander Missionaries in the Pacific*, Suva: Pacific Theological College and Institute of Pacific Studies, USP, 1996, 124.

<sup>23</sup> Nokise, "The Role of the London Missionary Society," 145.

The records mainly tell of the faifeau or pastor's name only, but seldom the name of the faletua or wife. But from the Tuvalu experience, the pastors' wives played a key role in their work. According to Latu Latai, Samoan Pastor's wives were also part of this mission and very little has been written about them.<sup>24</sup> They played very significant roles alongside their husbands who not only spread the Gospel, but also educated the indigenous people on how to read the Bible and sing Christian hymns. The Samoan Pastor's wives helped portrayed an image of ideal wives that influenced many Pacific women in the way they served the Church and of course their daily life styles.

Samoan Pastors' wives were good role models to their Pacific sisters, inspiring them to work hard in many different areas of the Church like Sunday school for children, youth fellowship, and women fellowship and not forgetting choir groups. They ran weekly programs not just on Sundays. These Samoan Pastor's wives played a vital role in the spreading of the Gospel in many parts of the Pacific not only Tuvalu. Their influence not only in the carrying out of their duties in the mission, but also helped local women become modernized.<sup>25</sup> For example women gradually gave up their traditional clothes made of leaves, but a switched to European style of clothing. This was not only appropriate for church but also for community gatherings.

According to Latai, Samoan missionaries and their wives' mission in Tuvalu and Kiribati started in the 1860s.<sup>26</sup> He argues that it was more successful in comparison to other mission fields like Vanuatu. It could be due to the small population in Tuvalu and

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<sup>24</sup> Latu, Latai; "Covenant Keepers: A History of Samoan (LMS) Missionary Wives in the Pacific from 1839 to 1979" Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, 2016, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Nokise, "The Role of the London Missionary Society," 145.

<sup>26</sup> Latai, "Covenant Keepers," 24.

Kiribati. Hence, why it was much easier to spread the Gospel. Samoan Pastors' wives were known for their strong morals and values, rich in cultures and traditions that helped them inspired the local women to be strong and bold in the mission field.

The local women managed to learn so much from the Samoan Pastors' wives not only in playing their roles in the missionary work, but also in looking after their families and disciplining children. This was quite significant because children were well mannered and respectful of their elders. Children were taught also by these Samoan Pastors' wives to know simple basic skills such as sewing and cooking for girls and fishing, hunting and farming for boys. Thus, not only did they help the local people with the Gospel, but they actually helped them know useful skills and knowledge for their daily lives to be improved.

The Church in Tuvalu was greatly influenced by Samoan missionaries and their wives, not only because they worked tirelessly in spreading the Gospel in Tuvalu, but also due to the fact that most Tuvaluan Pastors were trained in Malua Theological college. Hence Samoan and Tuvaluan cultures are both evident in the organisation of the Church.<sup>27</sup>

According to John Garrett, the Church in Tuvalu started as an out station of the LMS in 1965. The mission ship named *John Williams* travelled between the eight islands in Tuvalu with European LMS missionaries to check on the progress of the work done by Samoan missionaries. Garrett wrote that the Samoan missionaries used the British and Samoan Bible to spread the Gospel in the Pacific including Tuvalu. Hence

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<sup>27</sup> Latai; "Covenant Keepers," 30.

Tuvaluans who later joined Malua Theological College to study, continued to be fluent in the Samoan language. When they returned to Tuvalu, they continued using the Samoan language in their teaching of the Bible and in composing hymns and songs.

According to Garret, local people were influenced by the British way of carrying out Holy Communion.<sup>28</sup> The church and in particular the way worship was conducted were influenced by the Samoans. Women were also taught to dress appropriately to church services and any community gatherings.

He mentioned that when the Gospel spread throughout Tuvalu, the idea of forming a proper school was initiated and supported by a European who also helped set up the Motufoua School in Vaitupu Island. The School was a vision that became a reality as they realized the tremendous work of the Samoan Missionaries and their wives in educating the locals especially children to read the Bible, to be able to write and luckily they got motivated and finally a proper school was opened which is still here today. Motufoua secondary school was initially owned by the Church. But it was taken over by the Government due to financial issues.

The Tuvaluans who studied in Malua in Samoa came back and were ordained to run the Church and continue the work that the Samoan missionaries did in Tuvalu. It was a proud moment for Tuvalu when all the Samoan missionaries and their wives returned to Samoa as the Tuvaluans were successfully trained and ordained to preach

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<sup>28</sup> John Garrett; *Footsteps in the Sea; Christianity in Oceania to World War II*. Suva: University of the South Pacific, 1992, 12.

the Gospel to the people of Tuvalu.<sup>29</sup> In the year 1978 the church of Tuvalu gained its independence from the EFKS<sup>30</sup> to manage and administer their own affairs, and was called the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (EKT)

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<sup>29</sup> Garrett; *Footsteps in the Sea*; 14.

<sup>30</sup> The LMS Samoa was changed to EFKS or Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa in 1962 when the Samoan church gained independence from the LMS in London.

## Chapter 2

### OUR UNWRITTEN HISTORY: RE-TELLING OUR ORAL STORIES

#### Introduction

This chapter retells the arrival of Christianity according to the oral traditions of our island. This includes the events that occurred prior and during to Elekana's arrival from the perspective of the Nukulaelae people. The ancestors of Nukulaelae have orally passed down these histories from generation to generation. This chapter explores a pre-Christian deity *Tevalu* and how he influenced the way of life on this island. This chapter also explores the tales of Kafoa and her precognitive prophecy which people believed was fulfilled by the accidental arrival of Christianity upon the shores of Nukulaelae in the year 1861. The following narrative is specific to the people of Nukulaelae.

#### The Story of Tevalu

Prior to Christianity reaching the shores of Nukulaelae, a man by the name of *Tevalu*<sup>31</sup> lived on this island. As opposed to the ordinary inhabitants residing in Nukulaelae, *Tevalu* possessed a special attribute of a spirit-like creature known as 'Aitu'<sup>32</sup>. For this reason, the people of Nukulaelae referred to *Tevalu* as the one who holds the most power. *Tevalu* resided on an islet called *Niuoku*<sup>33</sup>, in an area called *Fale Atua*<sup>34</sup>, which translates as the "house of god".

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<sup>31</sup> The name of this specific *aitu* referred to in this chapter.

<sup>32</sup> A spirit-like creature that is known to be half mortal but also have attributes similar to that of an immortal God

<sup>33</sup> An islet of Nukulaelae. Please refer to the map of Nukulaelae.

<sup>34</sup> An area on the islet of *Niuoku* where *Tevalu* resided.



Customarily, the people of Nukulaelae devoted their time and lives to pleasing *Tevalu* so that there was peace amongst the village. The most fundamental aspect of a family was the children. To demonstrate the significance of their god, the villagers would often sacrifice their precious children to *Tevalu*. According to Rev. Elder Iosefa Mautinoa:

Different families would alternate between each other at presenting an offering to *Tevalu*. This was to ensure it was not always the same family appeasing *Tevalu* at the expense of their children. Once a child was presented, *Tevalu* would then feast on his offering.<sup>35</sup>

One day as time neared the traditional ceremony of *Tevalu*'s offering, the family who was to provide a child offering had two young boys named Moeava and Katuli. These two brothers planned the killing of *Tevalu* with the hope that the lives of young babies and children would be spared and the people of Nukulaelae would no longer have to live in fear.

The use of spears was a normal way of catching fish, and is a skill that is mastered by the fishermen. So it was normal for the people of Nukulaelae to carry their traditional fishing spears with them when they go spear fishing. This daily activity was what led Moeava and Katuli to become experts when it came to using traditional fishing spears. After years of accurately hitting a moving target, they knew they would be able to slay *Tevalu* using these very spears.

High Chief Aifou Tafia continues the story:

Once the time came for the boys' family to take their offering to *Tevalu*, Moeava and Katuli ensured that their spears were sharpened before they began their voyage to *Niuoku*, the islet of Nukulaelae where the pagan God *Tevalu* resided.

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<sup>35</sup> Iosefa Mautinoa, 2019 "Interview" with Moeava Mausalii, December 2019.

Legend says that when the two brothers reached the shores of *Niuoku*, *Tevalu* was fast asleep. From the stories that have been passed down by the ancestors of Nukulaelae, it has been said that one could only tell *Tevalu* was sleeping as it was the only time his eyes appeared to be open. This is because he would place small turban shells on his eyes, in the hopes of deceiving the villagers into believing that he was awake while in fact he was in a deep sleep.<sup>36</sup>

Moeava and Katuli knew that it was the perfect time to execute their plan because he was sleeping. The two brothers launched their spears towards *Tevalu* to which he awakened. It is said that the spears of the two brothers found their mark and left this god deeply wounded, to which he fled, flying above the palms of the coconut trees. His lifeless body was later found in an area which was quite a distance from where he was speared. From that point forward, the people of Nukulaelae rejoiced and were overwhelmed by happiness because they no longer had to live in fear. Most importantly, they no longer had to sacrifice a child as an offering, to what they once considered their god.

According to Rev. Elder Salanoa Tinilau, “*Tevalu’s* death brought freedom to the villagers. The people of Nukulaelae no longer lived in dismay, which is what led to some families migrating to another islet of Nukulaelae”.<sup>37</sup> Although some families chose to stay on the main island that was already inhabitant, others chose a new venture. The *Aliki*<sup>38</sup> at the time was one of those who chose to move to the other islets.

### **The Significance of the Story of Tevalu**

Local Elders in Nukulaelae today continue to tell this story and its importance and deep connection to the island. According to Tafia:

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<sup>36</sup> Aifou Tafia, Interview with Moeava Mausalii, December 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Salanoa Tinilau, Interview with Moeava Mausalii, December 2019.

<sup>38</sup> The high chief of the island.

The area of *Niuoku* where *Tevalu* resided is called *Teafaga Te tofi o Tevalu* or the place to worship Te'valu, and *Fale Atua* meaning the house of god. *Fale Atua* was the name given to the stone altar-like structure where the children were sacrificed, whereas *Teafaga Te tofi o Tevalu* was the name of the section of *Niuoku* where this structure is located. Moeava and Katuli found *Tevalu* sleeping in an area called *Ulitafauli* and slayed him using their spears to pierce his eyes. This is what caused the pagan god to flee in agony and then collapse to his death. His lifeless body was then found in the area *Teafaga Te tofi o Tevalu* where he was also buried as this section of land was owned solely by *Tevalu*.<sup>39</sup>

The story plays an important part in the lives of the people of Nukulaelae when it comes to religious worshiping. When Christianity was introduced to Nukulaelae, people had already practiced worshiping their god, and were used to making sacrifices and the pains it comes with it. This story is equally important with that of the story of Kafoa that we saw earlier. As Tinilau states:

Like many of the elderly women on the island, this woman had a tendency to bathe in the ocean at any time of day it was a habit of hers; during which she would usually prophesy and warn the villagers of something that was heading their way.<sup>40</sup>

This elderly woman was usually found on the lagoon side shores of *Niuoku* and when she would prophesy, she would always point towards the east side of *Niuoku*, the side from which the sun would rise.

What makes this intriguing is that when one is to bathe on the lagoon side shores of *Niuoku*, they are not able to see across the island to the ocean side. Yet when this elderly woman swam in the lagoon side shores and prophesize, she would constantly point towards the ocean side of the island proclaiming “there is something approaching us from the horizon over there. It will hit us with a great force similar to that of a gale

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<sup>39</sup> Tafia, Interview, December 2019

<sup>40</sup> Tinilau, Interview, December 2019

force wind; such force and speed that we will feel it hit us in one ear and out the other ear within a split second”.<sup>41</sup>

Each evening as this woman would go for her daily ventures on the shores of *Niuoku*, she would repeatedly announce her prophecy as a warning to the people. However, the people of Nukulaelae remained oblivious to the meaning of this prophecy.

Not long after Kafoa’s prophecy, arrived the wrecked voyage that Kafoa was continuously prophesying about. This boat stood out from the rest of the boats that were arriving on the island during this era. This was the boat of the deacon Elekana and his crew from the Cook Islands that accidentally drifted onto the shores of Nukulaelae.

### **Elekana’s Arrival – Nukulaelae’s Version**

The arrival of Elekana and his crew is well documented, as seen in the previous chapter. However, I would like to retell this from the perspective of the Nukulaelaean people, as there are some aspects that are not found in other versions.

During the era of Elekana’s arrival, the people of Nukulaelae lived on separate areas. Half of the population resided on the mainland of *Niuoku*, and the other half occupied an islet named *Motutala*<sup>42</sup>. The *talava* or servant of the *aliki*, was given the responsibility to look out for both the people on the mainland and on the other islets of the Nukulaelae islands to ensure their safety. As this era allowed the acquisitions of polygamous marriages, the *talava* himself had two wives. One which lived with him in

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<sup>41</sup> Tinilau, Interview, December 2019

<sup>42</sup> Another islet of Nukulaelae.

*Motutala* and the second wife living in the main island *Niuoku*. The Talava went by the name Mose. According to Mautinoa, “it is possible that the name Mose came from the Biblical Moses; a proof that the people has access to Christian teachings prior to Elekana’s arrival”.<sup>43</sup>

One day Mose, ventured on a trip to visit his second wife as he usually would. On this trip he would frequently stop over at each of the islets to ensure the villagers were not exploiting the natural wealth of these little islands and specifically to inspect any signs of shipwreck on these shores. As he made his way back from *Niuoku*, he arrived at *Vaiafua*<sup>44</sup> and noticed white clothes hanging amongst the leaves of the coconut trees to dry, on the ocean side of what was known as *Matamotu*, but is now called *Olataga*<sup>45</sup>.

Mose then continued onto *Olataga* to find out what it was and how it got there. He then came across a man who was clothed in white and spoke a foreign language that he could not comprehend. Due to the language barrier and being lost in translation, they resorted to hand gestures as a form of communication.

This man from the wreckage was the leader of these voyagers. Whilst the rest of the voyagers lay on the ground exhausted, the leader who was later known to be Elekana, tried to communicate with Mose through hand gestures. He pointed towards the coconut trees and made a drinking gesture with his hand to explain that his crew were dehydrated. Mose then began to climb the coconut tree to husk a coconut, which Elekana shared amongst himself and his men.

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<sup>43</sup> Mautinoa, Interview, December 2019

<sup>44</sup> A section of the islet *Niuoku*.

<sup>45</sup> A section of the islet *Tumiloto* which is where Elekana first set foot onto Nukulaelae.

After he provided the voyagers with coconuts, Mose asked them to wait while he proceeded to inform the *Alik*i about his discovery. When he arrived at the islet of *Motutala*, he informed the *Alik*i of his discovery of a wrecked boat that drifted onto *Matamotu*<sup>46</sup>. The *Alik*i then made an announcement to tell the villagers of the wreckage that drifted ashore on the ocean side of *Matamotu* and advised the men of Nukulaelae to come prepared with their weapons.

With this being said, Mose felt the urge to convince the *Alik*i that the people of Nukulaelae should not fear these voyagers because they were not people to fear. According to Tinilau, “Mose played a huge part in ensuring that the visitors were safe. Perhaps the exposure of Mose and other Tuvaluans to early Christian teachings may have led to this life saving moment.”<sup>47</sup>

With that, the *Alik*i then commanded the villagers to leave their weapons, but to go and bring back these voyagers who were shipwrecked. The men then prepared their traditional canoes to sail to the islet for Elekana and his crew to be brought back to the mainland.

The men of Nukulaelae arrived upon *Matamotu* and embraced Elekana and his men. They were taken onto the men’s traditional canoes, and were taken to *Motutala*, where the *Alik*i resided. The people of Nukulaelae warmly embraced Elekana and his men. They were welcomed with a traditional welcoming just as any other guest would

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<sup>46</sup> The former name for *Olataga* prior to the arrival of Christianity.

<sup>47</sup> Tinilau, Interview, December 2019.

be. It was at this point that Elekana assumed that they were already spiritual people, but they did not know of the God that he himself worshiped. From this point forward Elekana started to introduce the people of Nukulaelae to Christianity.

From then on, Elekana made an effort to get to know the people of Nukulaelae. Written history had it that Elekana used his native Rarotongan language to communicate with the people. However, the people of Nukulaelae believe that Elekana first tried to learn the language so that he was able to communicate with the villagers more effectively, and this was how he was able to preach the Word of God. Elekana's first language was Rarotongan, so by learning the Nukulaelae language, he was able to use a word to translate the Rarotongan word. Elekana and his crew would stay in Nukulaelae to spread the Word of God.

Pages from the Rarotongan bible were ripped by Elekana and distributed to the villagers. This made it easier for Elekana, because by learning some of the Nukulaelae language, he was also able to teach the villagers Rarotongan language. By teaching the villagers he was able to teach the Bible more efficiently which simplified his works of evangelism in Nukulaelae.

During his time on the island of Nukulaelae, the villagers became aware of the story behind the voyage of Elekana and his men. It became known that Elekana and his crew were travelling from Rakahanga to Manihiki for a church conference and as they were making their way back to Rakahanga, they were confronted with harsh winds which diverted their boat miles from its initial destination.

It is said to be known that during this expedition there were many times where the voyagers sighted land, yet each time they almost made it onto these shores a strong force wind would divert their boat into another direction. Once the crew caught sight of *Matamotu*, they gathered together and started praying to God, hoping that they would finally reach land. Shortly after their prayer, the voyagers began rowing the boat towards the shore and it was at this time that the wind did not oppose them but came up from behind and pushed the boat until they reached the area where the crashing waves of the ocean met the calm currents of the lagoon.

As they attempted to cross through the last waves of the ocean there was a mother aboard the boat who lost grasp of her baby. She then launched into the water to try and save her child and never arose to the surface. Altogether, there were nine known members aboard this boat, including the mother and her child, who drifted across the Pacific Ocean with Elekana for approximately eight weeks. Only five managed to land on the shores of *Matamotu* on what is now known as *Olataga* meaning ‘salvation’.

The time Elekana and his men spent on the island of Nukulaelae remains unknown, but according to the oral history passed down by the elders, Elekana hurried off to the theological college in Malua, Samoa and returned later to continue his evangelism. Elekana returned to Tuvalu in the year 1865 accompanied by Ministers as well as representatives of the London Missionary Society (LMS). Upon his return Elekana did not return to Nukulaelae but instead began his evangelism work at another island of Tuvalu, known as Nukufetau.



## Impact of Elekana's Teachings

In pre-Christian times, polygamy was the normality in Nukulaelae and this did not end until the influence of Christianity. Elekana ensured that the villagers adopted the Christian belief that only monogamous marriages were accepted. During his time on the island he taught the people of Nukulaelae how to read the Bible as well as how to sing hymns and give praise to the Lord. This then led to family devotions which were conducted in each household.

This was also the time when the people of Nukulaelae decided to abandon their witchcraft and dedicated their lives to the only true God. With this transformation came the sudden urge for a change in everything in Nukulaelae. As Tafia claims:

The *Aliki* who went by the name *Teavanoa* changed his name to *Tafalagilua*; *Matamotu* was changed to *Olataga*, *Mose* changed his name to *Faivatala* and these adjustments served as reminders of the way in which Christianity influenced the island of Nukulaelae.<sup>48</sup>

Christianity immediately had an impact on the way of life on this island, resulting in the end of island rivalry. This caused the island to reduce their guard. This is referenced by the way in which, in the past, the people of Nukulaelae played close attention to the people arriving on the island and what their intentions were. By increasing their leniency this made Nukulaelae more prone to vicious attacks such as the black birding which they fell victims to later, as referred to earlier in the previous chapter.

On the island the Missionary was treated with royalty, they adored him and showered him with many gifts. The discussion in the previous chapter on the influence

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<sup>48</sup> Tafia, Interview, December 2019.

and the impact made by the Samoan Missionaries and their wives are key to this rise in status of the Missionary. He held the same authoritative power as the *Aliki* of the island and was even allocated a *Pou* in the *Manaepa*. This is significant as only people of high cultural status were allowed to be seated at a *Pou* during special occasions.

The people of Nukulaelae no longer idolised *Tevalu* and the stone structure *Fale Atua* lost its significance. It still stands today to serve as a reminder of the sacrifices their ancestors made. The villagers no longer felt the need to worship their pagan gods as Christianity became the religion of the island. The arrival of Christianity was a memorable event that held great significance in the history of Nukulaelae as well as Tuvalu as a whole. To this day, the island of Nukulaelae is well known in Tuvalu as they were the first to formally receive Christianity.

## **Chapter 3**

### **OUR HISTORY ENRICHED: AMALGAMATING OUR WRITTEN AND ORAL STORIES**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter aims at providing an enriched history of the arrival of Christianity in our island. We have seen in the forgone chapters that there are differences in how the two narratives are told – the written, and the untold versions. The differences lie in how the traditional and oral historical accounts tend to “fill in the gaps” of the scholarly accounts. In other words, where there is agreement between main events which the scholars record, the oral tradition add more detail in between so as to enhance the history even more. By doing this comparison, it is also an attempt in harmonising both into one instead of trying to outweigh each other in a competing manner. Both histories complement each other.

#### **Pre-European Period**

The introduction of the Christian God to the people of Tuvalu may have been done by the first Europeans that came to Tuvalu. However, the essence of worshipping a deity that one believes in was imbedded within the people long before the Europeans came, as we have seen in the story of Tevalu and the story of Kafoa’s prophecy.

## **Tevalu**

It was during Tevalu's reign that the people of Nukulaelae in particular learned how to respect and worship their god. People were also introduced to the practice of sacrifices, when they have to sacrifice their children who were dear to them, to satisfy their god, Tevalu.

Whilst the scholarly accounts provide only a brief account of the spirit-like creature, it was clear to the people of Nukulaelae, that this was a deity to be feared. The oral traditions covers far more ground of this old god than the scholarly accounts. What stands out is how it presents a mythic narrative where it mentions two heroic boys, Moeava and Katuli, who venture to the island to kill the deity in order to stop the sacrificing of children to Tevalu. The mission is a success and Tevalu and its treachery are gone forever. The beauty of oral tradition is that it can be remembered as a genre, and in this case, a narrative or story-like portrayal of history which helps the local people of Nukulaelae record it throughout time and memory.

The various accounts by High Chief Aifou Tafia for instance, goes into detail about the manner in how Tevalu was killed. The use of sea-shells to cover the god's eyes in the pretence of being awake, not only has a creative appeal in the narrative, but serves its purpose in helping people remember this plot point as a crucial development to the narrative overall. Rev. Elder Iosefa Mautinoa speaks about the weapons used, the fish spears. Fish spears are a common tool in the Tuvaluan daily life for survival and their use in this narrative is symbolic of the Tuvaluan culture and of the Nukulaelae Islands in particular. There is definitely a cultural significance in the mention of this weapon, as the key to Tevalu's defeat.

What also adds to the symbolic nature of the narrative is also how names of places came to be due to the aftermath of the successful mission carried out by Moeava and Katuli. Not only is there a history of Tevalu and its deserved end, but also intertwined within are the histories behind the naming of places and how they came to be.

The people of Nukulaelae also experienced bravery as it is told in the story about the two brothers, Moeava and Katuli, who stood up to uphold what was right, and wipe out the evil that was driving fear into their people's hearts by killing Tevalu. Although the brothers were said to be killed by a raiding warrior according to written sources, their courage and bravery should be recorded as a mark of valour that ought to be remembered.

### **Kafoa's Prophecy**

Whilst the scholarly accounts in chapter 1 briefly mention Kafoa as an old woman who had prophecies of the arrival of a new god, it does not go into much detail as the oral accounts have in their recollections from the local people. The oral accounts speak of Kafoa as an elderly lady bathing on the shores of the Niuoku lagoon where she would point towards the east side of Niuoku, where the sunrise was. Each day she would speak of this oracle about a new god coming, much to the avoidance and obliviousness of the people. Again this complements the scholars brief accounts where it thus provides more layers into the explanation and justification of Kafoa's existence as a real character.

The story of Kafoa plays an important part in this narrative. Prophecies are not new in the Pacific, let alone in Polynesian countries including Tuvalu. For instance, the arrival of Christianity in Samoa is still believed to have been prophesied by Nafanua, the warrior goddess. Likewise, as we have seen in both our written and oral accounts, Kafoa's prophecy about something good that is coming out of the horizon could have been fulfilled with the accidental arrival of Elekana's boat on the shores of Nukulaelae.

Moreover, we can also relate Kafoa's prophecy to the arrival of the first Europeans with the Christian message. The arrival of Elekana and his message was easily accepted by the people, because they have heard of this God before. It is therefore possible that Kafoa's prophecy was more appropriately related to the first European settlers, rather than Elekana. Whichever the case, the common element within this part of the narrative is the message about the Christian God. That is most probably what Kafoa was prophesying about.

### **European Arrival**

As far as the traditional accounts are concerned, there is no mention of any oil traders, beachcombers nor any record of black birding as the scholarly accounts suggest. But there would have definitely been reasons as to why this is so. Perhaps it is because it left such a negative mark on their island's consciousness that it was purposely avoided left as a black mark on their history. Such a black mark would definitely explain why events such as black birding were often not spoken of. Given that it was a period of exploitation of labour from a said Tom Rose, where the Tuvaluans were deceived and went onboard unknowingly as slaves, it would have had such an impact that there would have been need for it to be discussed given its notoriety. But again,

perhaps the Tuvaluan response of silence or avoidance was the best way to keep this at bay, so as to eliminate any memory of this dark and painful past.

### **Elekana's Arrival**

There is not much difference in the recorded information and the oral stories about the arrival of Elekana. However, the oral account is much more detailed that it warrants a place in the written records. The name of the *Talava* or Chief's servant who discovered the shipwreck was *Mose*. This is interesting information because *Mose* could have come from the name Moses in the Bible: an evidence that he was named<sup>49</sup> perhaps due to the influence of the early European settlers.

The oral accounts reveal the important role the *Talava* plays in the islands and their impact within the narrative on the arrival of Elekana and his crew. When the story about the shipwreck was told to the chief and the people of Nukulaelae, it is written that the chief sent his bodyguards to check them out. However, according to oral sources, the people of Nukulaelae did not receive this story with a passive attitude. Instead, the chief ordered the men to fetch their weapons and prepare for war. This is an understandable way to react to situations as such. It was only with the urging of *Mose*, that these people are harmless, that the Chief ordered the people to leave their weapons. This part of the story tells us that our people were protective of themselves and would do anything to ensure their own safety.

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<sup>49</sup> He could have changed his name to "*Mose*" from an original name, as name-changing was also a common practice in the Pacific.

Mose the *Talava* played a major role in preventing an attack on Elekana and his crew. Although the scholarly view merely states that an attack was prevented upon the return of the bodyguards and their report to the High Chief, the oral tradition states that it was Mose the *Talava*, who convinced the High Chief to lay down their arms and welcome them in peace as they were harmless. The role that Mose played cannot be underplayed here; it warrants special attention. Minor characters like Mose that are being left out in the scholarly accounts serve as role models for the current and future generations when they read about them.

The written history also has it that Elekana used his native Cook Island language to teach the people but oral accounts suggests that he learned the Tuvaluan language first so that he could get to know the people better. He also used pages of the Rarotongan bible to give to the locals so that they could identify similar words and thus get an understanding of the bible in their own language. The Samoan Pastors took a different and bold approach, where they taught the Tuvaluans the Samoan language. According to the oral sources, the Samoans' approach suited their style for they were passionate about their work. And teaching in their own language proved to be successful.

Another interesting point to note is the official landing of Christianity in Tuvalu. Goldsmith and Munroe were careful in saying that "Tuvalu began its formal association with Protestantism in 1865 as an outpost of LMS enterprise Samoa."<sup>50</sup> I say this because Elekana completed his training at the Malua Theological College, and returned with Missionary A.W. Murray in 1965. However, official records reveal that the year in

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<sup>50</sup> Goldsmith and Munroe, "Conversion and Church Formation in Tuvalu", 44.



which Christianity was officially introduced and accepted in Tuvalu was in 1961, the year Elekana was washed ashore with members of his crew. This is a silent victory for Tuvalu from an islander's perspective, where the norm was to acknowledge something only if there was a *palagi* involved. Yet the acknowledgment of the work of Elekana, an islander, gives us islanders the courage to ensure that our voices are heard in the telling of our histories.

## CONCLUSION

The history of how Christianity arrived into Nukulaelae, Tuvalu is well documented in written accounts. Although these literary evidence are predominantly from European/Caucasian accounts, They tend to be the more popular choice of historical study today in general academia. However, despite these written accounts, there will always be issues in relation to the apparent bias of the historian, especially when they are not from the land that they purport to write about albeit with a sense of pride, bringing in their own preconceptions about a place whom they are foreign to. This is no different than the case with the European written accounts of history of the arrival of Christianity in my island, Nukulaelae, Tuvalu.

This paper has addressed not only the written accounts of my island's history of Christianity, but also the oral accounts based on traditions passed down from generation to generation from the local Nukulaelae populace, who are mainly leaders and elders within the community.

The approach of this paper analyzed the written accounts first, which was then compared to the oral traditions for the purposes of finding similarities and differences. Both of these accounts were then amalgamated together to assess how they could complement each other so that the Nukulaelae history of Christianity could be given more justice in presenting a more complete and wholistic record of history.

In highlighting the importance of history, to understand which direction a people should go, it is important first to understand where the people came from. And it is no

different to the people of Nukulaelae, Tuvalu. For the history of Christianity in Nukulaelae. Tuvalu, is also a history which will give the church and its people direction under the guidance of God. It is hoped that this paper has at the very least, served this purpose with hope for the future in an evolving modern world.

## Glossary

*Aitu*: a spirit-like creature that is known to be half mortal but also have attributes similar to that of an immortal God.

*Te'valu*: the name of this specific *aitu* referred to in this chapter.

*Niuoku, Motutala, Tumiloto*: these are islets of Nukulaelae.

*Vaiafua, Fale Atua*: some islets were rather large and therefore divided into smaller sections. Each section was then given a name of its own beside the islet name. *Vaiafua* was a section of *Niuoku* and so was *Fale Atua*.

*Matamotu/Olataga*: a section of the islet of *Tumiloto*. Prior to the arrival of Christianity this section was known as *Matamotu*, literally meaning the end of the islet; however, after the introduction of Christianity, this specific area of *Tumiloto* is where the deacon Elekana first set foot onto Nukulaelae. Because of this, the name was changed from *Matamotu* to *Olataga* which translates to salvation.

*Alik*i: the high chief of an island who held authoritative power over the people of Nukulaelae. This power was later bestowed upon Elekana once the *Alik*i himself accepted Christianity.

*Talava*: this term was used in reference to a servant of the high chief. His roles were similar to that of an Orator in the Samoan hierarchical system yet the significance of his status differed slightly. This role also incorporated monitoring and patrolling of the island.

*Pakaso*a: Chiefly necklace made of oyster shells that symbolize Power and Responsibility of Chief in being the Leader of his people.

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