

Chapter 3

The Āhiga – The Heart of the Community

At the center of the village in Nanumea stands the island's community hall, its *āhiga*. On either end of the building are the two village sides, Lolua and Haumeafa. Toward the lagoon is the community playing field, *malae*, and to the ocean side is the church, the pastor's house and other church buildings. The *āhiga* is the focus of all island-wide activities. Whenever Nanumeans meet for an event involving the whole community, *te fenua*, they gather here. This chapter describes the *āhiga* and its history, along with its importance today as a gathering place and as the core symbol of Nanumea as a community.

The Ancient Āhiga

We cannot be sure when the first of Nanumea's *āhigas* was built. But since the meeting house institution is found in so many societies of Polynesia, as well as neighboring Kiribati and other Micronesian societies, we can conclude that the *āhiga* has probably been the focus for community life in Nanumean since the earliest times. This conclusion is also supported by traditional stories which tell about ancient events that happened in the *āhiga*. An example is the story of Taitai and Temotu (their other names are Kaitu and Uakeia), in which Taitai was killed while helping replace one of the pillars of the *āhiga*. Certainly the *āhiga* was established in Nanumea many centuries ago, most likely in its present location at the heart of the village.

The ancient *āhiga* was built completely of local materials. Its main pillars were made of *fala* which were supported by base posts made of *milo*, which was slow to rot. The rafters and roof structure were made of split *fala* timbers. The external supporting posts and cross pieces were made of coconut timber which had also been split, the outer posts about 4x2 inches and *tālava* crosspieces about 3x2 inches. The floor of the *āhiga* was originally made of *kilikili* gravel, and later of lime cement, while the beams and cross beams were all lashed with braided coconut fiber cord. The roof was thatched with pandanus and the sides were protected from wind and rain by *tīpola* shades woven from dried coconut fronds (*tīpola* were about 4 ft by 1 ft in size). There was nothing inside the building except a flooring of rough *kapau* mats, which normally were folded up and gathered together in the corner of the building. When the community gathered in the building, each family brought its own sitting mats to place on top of the rough undermats.

Probably the most impressive feature of the ancient *āhiga* was its thatched roof, which required many thousands of hand-made pandanus thatch panels. The high roof would have been visible from anywhere in the village center. Those seated inside would have seen the hundreds of rows of neatly tied thatch, and each family would have sat under a particular roof section, their *inaki*. This roof worked wonderfully to shield those inside from the sun, wind and rain, but was time-consuming to maintain. About every three years the thatch needed renewing. This was a major village project and all families would be assigned a quota of thatch and rolled sennit cord to provide. Each woman might be assigned to make one hundred thatch panels for her contribution, while men would have to supply a set number of fathoms of cord as well as other building materials needed for the renovation. The young people had the job of thatching the *āhiga*, with young women carrying the thatch panels and the young men climbed up in the rafters to position and tie them under the direction of elders.

Modernizing the Āhiga

Today's *āhiga*, by contrast, is made entirely of permanent materials. It stands on the site of the ancient foundation, though it is a bit larger, at 30 by 50 meters. The reconstruction was begun in 1964 and completed in 1965, with all labor supplied the people. Pastors Enoka Alesana (from Samoa) and the Reverend Founuku Tipelu (from Nanumea) also gave their support. While before, one could sit and look up to the thousands of thatch panels making up the roof, these were now replaced with metal, and a ceiling was installed, so the interior of the building felt much lower than previously. Also different was the flooring, which was now made of cement instead of gravel. Woven coconut leaf rough mats (which cushioned the gravel floor) are no longer used, though sitting mats, *papa*, are still spread as seating over the smooth cement floor.

Every decade or so this building is also renovated and repainted. The most recent renovation, lasting nearly a month, was completed in late September 2002. The roofing metal was replaced at this time, and a new shiny ceiling with fluorescent lighting was installed. New drop down rolls of canvas tarps (yellow inside, green outside) were also installed, and the low walls of the building were replaced and lowered to an ideal height for sitting and watching play in the playing field. The interior signs "United We Stand" (Haumaefa end) and "N'ameana II" (Lolua end) were repainted and large new food preparation and auxiliary storage buildings were built at each end of the hall for the two sides. Haumaefa's building is called "Faikimua," and Lolua's is "Faivalevale." With its

fresh white interior paint with light green accents, the renewed *āhiga* is an impressive place for island activities.

People say that in ancient times the *āhiga* was simply the *āhiga*, it had no special name. At the time of the first reconstruction of the building in permanent materials about 1964, elders decided to name the building. Many names were considered, and they decided to use the phrase “What have you got?” *Ni ā au Mea Nā* as the basis for the poetic name “*N’ameana*.” This name refers to the important activity of *āhi* or display, which takes place in the *āhiga* when elders display their words, thoughts and character in speeches (showing what they’ve got), and also when prescribed family prepared foods are evaluated. In this latter case, several people *āhi* around the hall, stopping by each family, examine their food trays and kete, and announce to the hall whether one meets, or fails to meet, the requirement. People say that the pastor at the time of the reconstruction, Enoka Alesana, helped in this process of coming up with a name by painting a sign to hang in the *āhiga*.

In the old days, when there were events after dark in homes or the *āhiga*, lighting was provided by coconut shell lamps (*molī fāgogo*) which burned coconut oil or whale oil, which was sometimes available. The wick was lit with fire produced by a fire plow method (*hika*). At full moon, its light also sufficed for *āhiga* activities. Starting in the 1940s and into the 1950s, the bottle lamp (*molī fangu*) and a few hurricane lamps (*molī matagi*) were introduced. Wide-mouth glass jars became available from the American troops stationed at Nanumea during World War II. From these bottles, with a wick hung in the middle and a bit of kerosene in the bottom, Nanumeans made “bottle lamps” (*molī fagu*), which meant all houses could now have inexpensive lamps. Kerosene lamps of all these types provided better light in the *āhiga* for community events than was possible with the old coconut oil lamps. During the decade of the 1950s, use of hurricane lamps increased and some families recently returned from working at Banaba and Nauru brought back pressure lamps. Whenever there was a *fātele* dance at night, those families would be asked to lend their pressure lamps.

In the decade of the 1960s, the use of pressure lamps was common. Wives of Nanumean men who worked for the government in Tarawa purchased a generator which was used to light the *āhiga*, the church and the pastor’s house. Not long after this, in the 1980 and 1990’s, solar lights were purchased by the majority of families, with support from the central government and an overseas aid project. In the new century, about 2000 onward, electric power has been provided to all village houses and public buildings by a diesel generators in a powerhouse near the cemetery owned by the electricity authority in Funafuti. Power is available at a subsidized rate, and is provided for 14-18 hours per day.

The House of Words

The term *āhiga* is a noun we believe to be derived from the verb “*āhi*,” which has various meanings including “to visit, check up on, inspect, display, compete, and test.” Probably the most important meanings stemming from the word are “to inspect” and “to display.” During feasts it is common for community leaders to check that each family group has brought the specified foods (*fakaluaga*.) Several people go around to “check up” (*āhi*) on this and to announce, often humorously, if the requirement has been met. The other important meaning of the verb *āhi* is “display.”

What is on display are the words, opinions, knowledge, and skill of each family’s elders, the men who speak in the hall. The phrase, “house of words” is thus an appropriate description for Nanumea’s *āhiga*, which is the “House of the Display of Words.” This “House of Words” is the place where the most valued possessions of the community are protected, not things which can be seen with the eye, but the words handed down from those who have gone before, preserved here to feed the ongoing generations of the community, here in the House of Words. In the expression, “Display of Words,” it is people who have been given food and drink in the form of words of the house. Additionally, in the Display of Words of the House, this is the time when one’s hearing and understanding is tested, whether one understood the “Words of the House” in the past, is understanding them now, or will understand them in the future.

These words, which express the collective wisdom and instructions for the future generations of Nanumea, are an important part of the wealth of the community. When speeches are made, when knowledge from the past is called on by elders and offered for all to hear, valuable treasures of our community are being shared. In being publically displayed and used, the wisdom of those who have gone before is also being transmitted through time to nourish the new generation.

The *āhiga* is used for any function which involves the whole island, such as:

- Discussions of the elders
- Island-wide meetings
- Installations of the high chief
- Hosting guests of the community
- “Big Days” – Christmas, New Year, Potopotoga competitions, and Tefolaha’s Day
- Other functions by groups which ask and receive permission to use the *āhiga*
- Any other festive days where use of the *āhiga* is appropriate

The *āhiga* is also a place where the younger generation is instructed, especially the young men. Parents say to their sons: “You should always try to be present at all community-wide functions in the *āhiga*, because you will:

- Increase your knowledge of the affairs of the community
- Broaden your understanding of things beyond yourself
- Enhance your ability to judge the characteristics of people through their speeches in the *āhiga*
- Hear inspirational speeches by the elders about the good and the reputation of the island
- Increase your courage, and develop a forward-looking and achievement-oriented approach, through the words of the elders, words such as ‘Remember your island wherever you go. When you leave it, you’ll find that people may be hostile and you must be ready.’ Better to use your mind than your muscle.
- Demonstrate by your participation the fact that you are a person with true community-mindedness, in other words, a true descendant of Tefolaha.

Community Feasts in the Āhiga

This section describes a typical day in which the island gathers for a function in the *āhiga*. In the evening a day or two before a gathering, a crier goes up and down the village streets to announce the event and the food items each family is to bring. On the day of the feast, the trumpet (*pu*) signals to people that it is time to assemble for the noon meal. The elders who sit at the main posts would have already gone up with their materials for making *kolokolo* cord. Some of them would make cord, while others might play “Rummy.” At about 11:30 women arrive with their baskets or trays of food. By noon, the *āhiga* would be full of people. At each post would sit a male elder and other male family heads would sit between the posts. The women would be back by the walls of the *āhiga* readying platters of food for their men.

At noon, the Speaker, *tukumuna*, stands, says a few words of thanks for people having gathered, and asks the women to bring the trays of food for elders in the front. He then asks the pastor to say grace before everyone begins to eat. Young girls sit beside their family heads fanning away flies. When the family elder finishes, the girl carries his tray back to the rest of the family so they can eat, and brings handwashing water and a small towel to the elder so he can wash his hands. When the speaker sees that most elders have finished eating, he stands again and says something like this:

“Well, in honor of the house and its four sides, and the gray hairs [elders] at its posts, as well as the island Pastor, I stand here, noticing that those sitting at the posts are ready so we are going to open the house for speeches.”

Elders who wish to offer speeches do so. Either side may begin the speeches, which normally alternate between speakers from Lolua and Haumaefa. There may be just one or two speeches from each side, or there could be many, depending on the event and the level of enthusiasm. If the island's representative to the national parliament is present, he or she might speak and offer information or clarification from the capital. The pastor always makes a speech, usually about in the middle of proceedings after elders from both sides have stood to speak. Nanumeans say that, unlike other islands, as many elders as wish to speak may do so, and speeches are not limited to just two from each side. Speeches may also continue to be made after the pastor has spoken.

Often on a festive day in the *āhiga* there is a program of entertainment planned. The speaker gauges the speeches being made and when it is clear that people have spoken their minds, he stands, thanks everyone for their useful words, and announces that the house is “open” now for entertainment. Elders now relax, stretch out their feet, and some pull mats to the center of the building where a group gathers to play cards. Women take this opportunity to arrange the family food and other items and ask a young family member to carry these back home. Women also gather in groups to play cards. If there is another outdoor game, the *pū* is sounded to summon players. People sit on the steps and inside the low walls watching the play, which can go on until dusk.

Respect for the Āhiga

As we have seen above, there are many kinds of activities that take place in the *āhiga*. The community comes together in the building to greet visitors, to celebrate holidays and to hold *fātele* and other dances. Often there is joking and laughter, and children join parents in filling the hall. But there is a more serious side to *āhiga* etiquette, too, since respect for the *āhiga* is very important in Nanumea.

Even speeches which may be funny and provoke laughter usually have a serious side. Elders use their speeches to highlight what is important to the community, and everyone is expected to listen respectfully. Children are not allowed to make noise during speeches, and drunks, if they come around, are not tolerated. They are restrained by those nearby so that they cannot enter. In earlier days it was dangerous to cause a disturbance in the *āhiga*. If a drunk man insisted on coming into the *āhiga* and his behavior was unacceptable, men who were close to the drunkard were just waiting for someone to cry out “strangle him,” or maybe “beat him up!”

In 1963, when Nanumea's old thatched *āhiga* was still standing, something like this happened. Members of the men's group called the Volentia, perhaps twenty men, were making handicrafts inside the *āhiga* when a drunken man entered with a large stone in his hand. He came up to the nearest person and said: "Do you want to fight?" The person sitting down answered: "Why don't you leave us alone and go away?" The drunk then went up to other people one by one until he came to a much older man and elbowed him hard. And at this, a shout rang out: "Beat him up!" The Volentia men stood up and began kicking the drunk with kicks until he was lying on the floor, making more blows unnecessary. Women whose houses were nearby screamed that someone had been beaten up in the *āhiga*. Pastor Enoka Alesana heard the cries and rushed over to the hall, asking permission to enter. The men cooled down a bit once they recognized it was the pastor. Tears spilling from his eyes, the pastor said the following:

"Many times I have heard stories about this, but this is the first time I have witnessed it with my own eyes -- and the stories are really true."

This man, fortunately, did not die, though he came close to the grave. For nearly two weeks he couldn't move, but luckily his wife was skilled in massage.

Nanumeans say that this story shows the importance of unity. When the cries "Strangle him!" and "Grab him and kill him!" rang out, everyone inside the *āhiga* was expected to unite behind them. Anyone who hung back or sided with the man could also be attacked and possibly killed. Only one thing could protect this man, and that was the women. If women surrounded the man, no one could hit or kick him lest one of the women be injured, which was not allowed.

This story serves as a warning applying especially to young men. Everyone should take great care with aggressiveness when people gather in the *āhiga*, lest something bad happen. As people who have gone before have said:

"If you are aggressive when there are a lot of people gathered together, how can you yourself expect to stand up to the whole island? Where will your misbehavior and your aggression get you? It is better to enjoy yourself in the open somewhere else, rather than to test yourself in the *āhiga* against many people or even the whole island."

Stories like this emphasize the honor and respect that is due the *āhiga*. Almost every speech made in the *āhiga* also reminds us of this respect, since all speakers begin with a phrase like this:

"The honor of the house, the honor of the four sides of the house, the honor of the pillars and seats of the house, the honor of the gray hairs of the island...."

Another aspect of the respect due to the *āhiga* is that it is not considered appropriate for just anyone to stand up and speak.

Qualifications for Speaking in the Āhiga

Male elders are the only ones who are entitled to speak at most gatherings in the *āhiga*. Normally these men sit in the front, at the posts or in the gaps between them.¹ In the past, all of these old men would have been expected to have donated a gift of produce of the land or sea to the community (these donations and the prestige they confer are discussed below in “Wind of the Āhiga.”) If a family’s oldest representative is only about 50 years old, he would not sit in line with the elders up front but rather a bit behind them, even as far back as the rear wall.

Anyone outside this relatively small group of elders feels unable to speak in the *āhiga*. The unwritten rule against speaking makes it difficult even for someone who has reached the age of 50 to speak. Elders say that those who are young should just listen properly and learn from the procession of speeches, waiting for the time that their hair is really white. That is the real identification of an elder, someone who is sixty or older. By that age, one is eligible to speak with authority and to discipline the younger generation. Speaking while still young shows a lack of respect and disregard for the elders and other community members. Younger people who have spoken in the *āhiga* say they feel so shy that they sometimes mispronounce words or get mixed up in the middle of their talk. Even the ordinary comments of the elders such as “aue, aue, mālō!” are disconcerting to them.

The following story illustrates the importance placed on having the right qualifications to speak in the *āhiga*. One day, in about 1962, there was a big *fātele* celebration, absolutely a wonderful one, because so many people attended. Usually it is only at the Tefolaha’s Day celebration that people can move back and forth from a group at one end of the *āhiga* to the group at the other end. Only at that celebration, after they have donated their money can people continue on to the other side to dance. But on that night,

¹ The main exceptions to this rule are:

- All-women festivities or meetings (women’s day, women’s choir day, women’s committee, etc). In these events, elder women take on leadership and speaking roles; men are usually not present.
- Meetings called by the local or national government to gather island opinion or explain policy. At these meetings, those 18 or over can participate and both men and women are entitled to speak.
- Thank you speeches by invited guests of the island, who are expected to stand and speak. These may include male or female spokespersons for children’s groups, workers returned from overseas, consultants and others with a special role to play.
- Male heads of extended families who may feel themselves too young to sit in the front row, but stand and speak from the back area from time to time.
- The island EKT pastor, who, regardless of his age, is expected to stand and speak at most events.

some drunken young men were going back and forth between the two groups. When they went to the other side to dance they crossed right in front of the old men. Some people murmured critically that these young men should be beaten up. A little later the *fātele* stopped. Speeches from the elder men focused on the behavior displayed by the young men. One elder stood up and said in his speech:

“The island is now beginning to be disturbed by those who have come from school.” [By this time there were quite a few students who had been educated at KGV at Bikenibeu, Tarawa, and also students from Motufoua, Vaitupu].

One of these young men who had just returned from school, sober now, tried to stand up to reply to the criticism. Those beside him tried to hold him back, but he still requested the opportunity to speak and was finally allowed to do so. He tried to respond properly, apologising for all those who were called “educated young men.” When he sat down, another old man stood up and said:

“Just look at this! No respect for the *āhiga* now! Even the youngsters are trying to stand and make speeches in front of the respected old men.”

This example shows the high level of respect required in the *āhiga*, together with the honor that should be shown to its elders.

Old men today respect and value the ideas and thoughts of the younger generation. Despite their youth, the elders recognize that the knowledge available from school today has allowed us to reach the standard of living that we now enjoy. Nevertheless, there is still a strongly held feeling that the traditions of the *āhiga* are valuable. The domination of events by men, the strong emphasis on age and seniority, the view that younger people should be respectful and listen – all these principles guide the community events which take place in the *āhiga*. There are those who note the disjuncture between these traditional rules and the contemporary emphasis on democracy, gender equity, and opportunities for the young. But for now, Nanumea remains steadfast in support for customary *āhiga* practices.

Seating in the Āhiga

Let us now take a closer look at who sits where in the *āhiga*, both now and in the historic past. As noted above, male elders have always occupied prominent seats “in front,” at the posts of the building. These seating places are inherited in the family, passing from father to son. Other elders occupy their family seating areas in the gaps between posts, while the families of each elder sit behind him near the low outer wall of the building. Today, the island’s high chief sits at the center post on the lagoon side, flanked on his left by the speaker,

tukumuna, and on his right by the council president, *pulekaupule*. People recall that in the past the high chief sat at the same center post. To his right was Chief Kaubure, to his left, the Magistrate. Opposite the high chief, at the center post on the ocean side of the hall, sits the island's Tuvalu Christian Church pastor, a position reserved for the pastor since the coming of the church.² Those with government positions such as the islands' representative to the Tuvalu Parliament or the members of the Council also sit on the lagoon side when they attend meetings. And, of course, Haumaefa people sit on the Haumaefa end of the building, while those from Lolua sit on the Lolua end.

In the past, each chiefly branch and each *kopiti* group had its designated seating area. These were used for special occasions. According to elders who discussed this with Keith and Anne in the 1970's and 1980's, chiefly branches had the seating areas diagrammed below in **Illustration 3.1**. Note that the Aliki a Muli branch sat at what is now the Lolua end of the hall, while the Aliki a Mua branch occupied what is now the Haumaefa end. *Kopiti* groups, according to elders, met only occasionally. When they did, they also had designated areas in the āhiga. Since *kopiti* stopped functioning many years ago, information on their seating areas and their functions is fragmentary.³ Also see **Illustration 3.1**.

Wind of the Āhiga

Just as the wind moves the coconut leaves and other plants, and a strong wind can blow down houses and uproot big trees, so too with people. It is the wind of his heart that determines what a man does, from little things all the way to big things, either good things or bad.

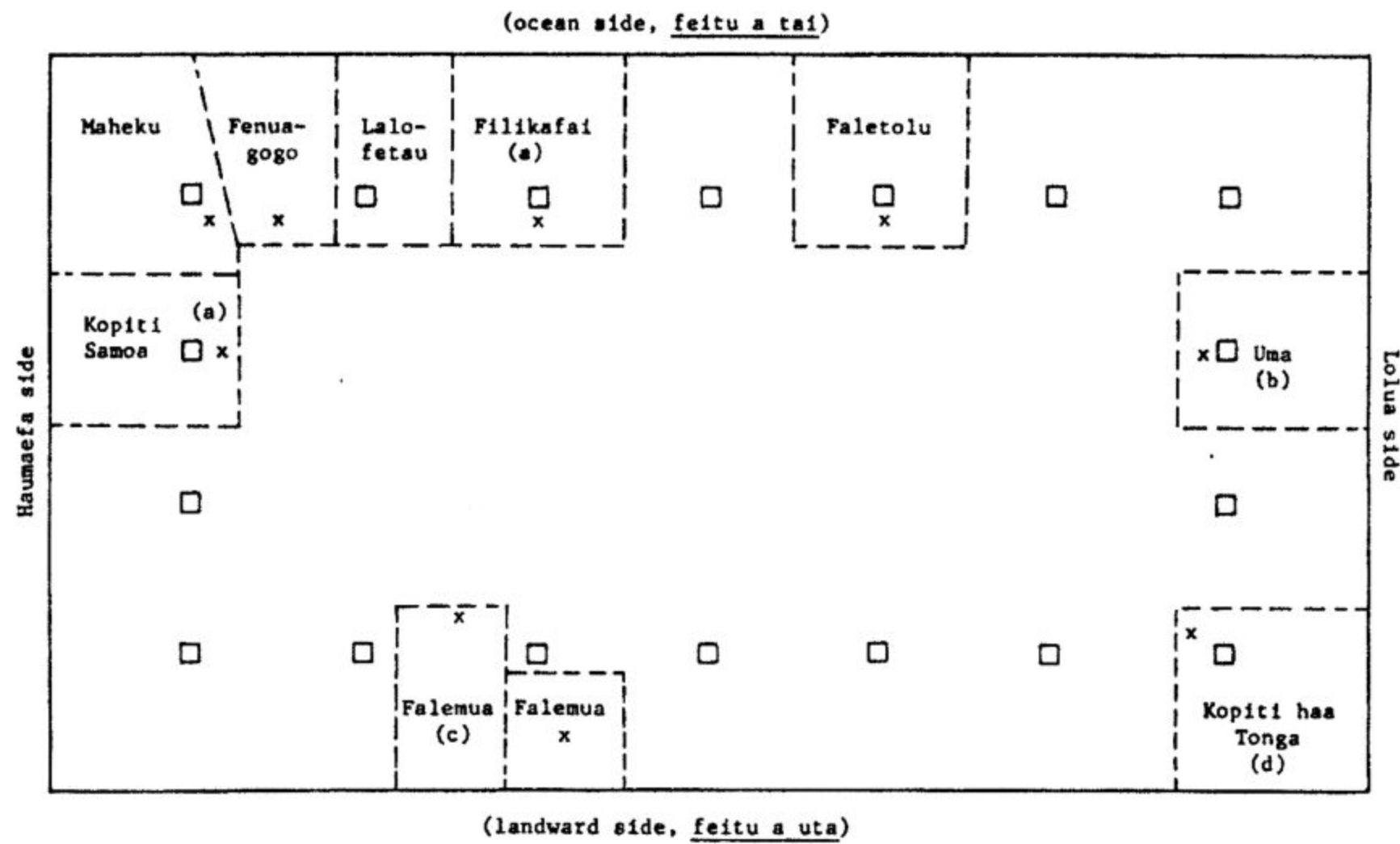
As this saying shows, wind is an important concept in Nanumea.⁴ The word “wind,” *matagi*, can refer simply to the wind that blows or brings storms. But the most interesting use of this word concerns people's enthusiasm: we say that they “catch the wind” (*poko te matagi*) when they are caught up in the excitement of the moment. If they are singing a song, or dancing a *fātele* and they begin to feel the beat and put their whole heart into it (maybe jumping up to dance individually with arms outspread and whooping enthusiastically,

² Seating in the āhiga in the pre-Christian era is not known with certainty. Many elders say the reigning chief sat on the center of the lagoon side, where he sits today. Who sat at the post opposite him, where the pastor now sits? The family tradition of Loto (provided to us in January 2004) says that this post was reserved for the Matapule Alikī, a high level supporting role, while to the high chief's right and slightly behind him sat the Matapule Taufā. We do not have any other information about these two names or who sat at these locations, and these two names were not used by elders during Keith and Anne's work in Nanumea in 1973-75.

³ Not all elders could recall this information. This sketch is a “best guess” based on all the information provided. For clarification of the issues of interpretation involved, see *Heirs of Tefolaha*, pages 215-227.

⁴ Some of the chiefly branches were also associated with particular winds. See Chapter 2.

I. Kopiti Seating Places



Seats of leading elders in each group are marked by "x"

Notes

a) Filikafai and Kopiti Samoa are synonyms for the same group (Chambers, *Heirs of Tefolaha*, p. 163). The two seating positions marked here were supplied by different elders based on their memories of *kopiti* gatherings in the past. Our opinion is that the ocean side position indicated for *Filikafai* is probably this *kopiti*'s original sitting place.

b) This seating location for Uma is based on observations by Keith Chambers in the 1970s. It is not certain, but based on our opinion.

c) Tepou, a leading member of Falemua, told Keith Chambers in the 1970's that his *kopiti*'s traditional seating place was the smaller of the two areas marked here, and that elders of his group did not traditionally sit in the front rank but sat behind as shown by the "x." This was in keeping with their role of "sitting and watching over the island." Another elder recalled the Falemua group as sitting one post further to the left, as shown by the larger of the two areas marked. He felt that an elder of the group usually sat at the front as indicated by the "x."

d) Information on the seating place for *Kopiti haa Tonga* was provided to Keith Chambers from just a single elder who was 13 or 14 years old at the time of the last *kopiti* gathering in the early 1950's.

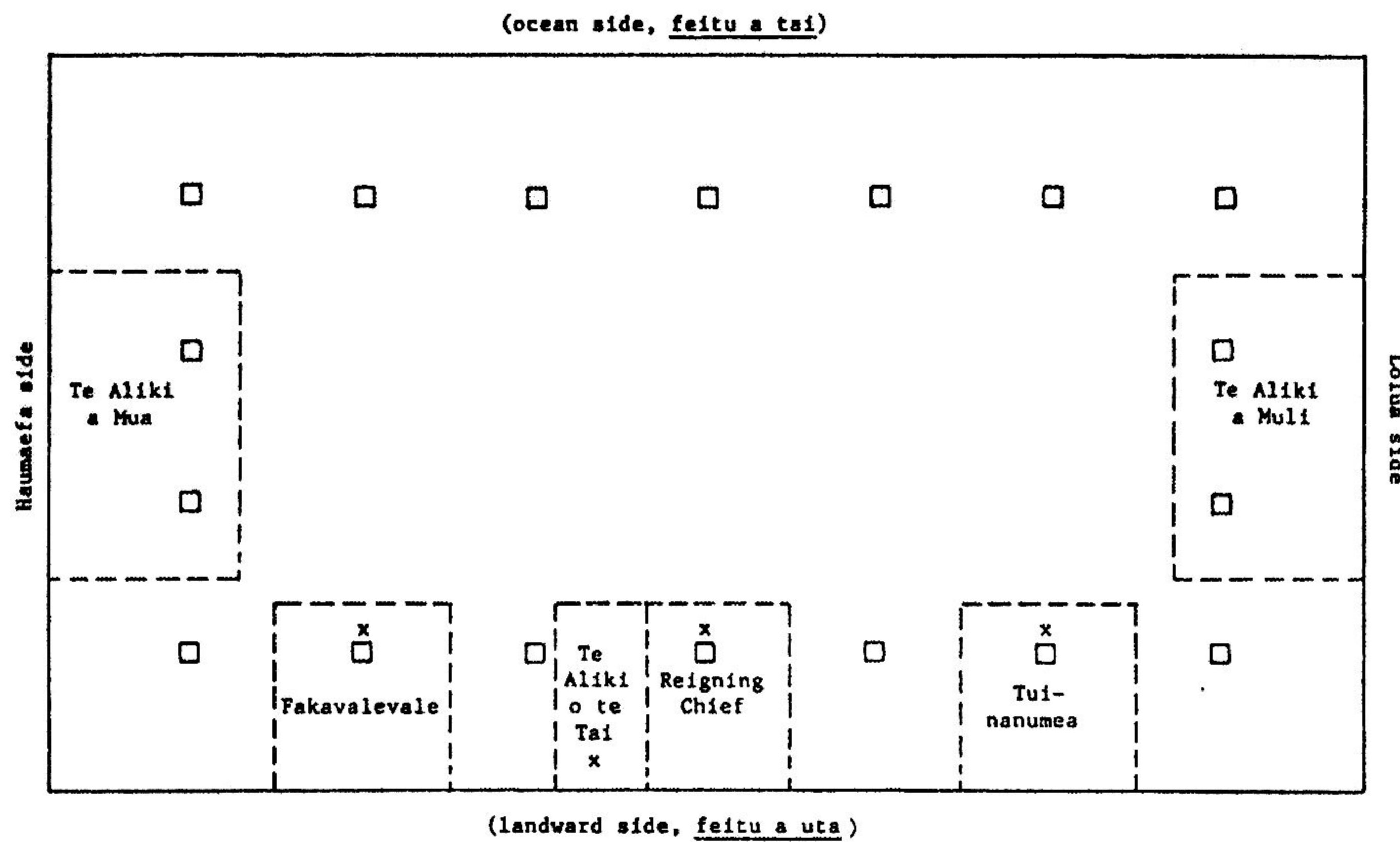
Kopiti for which no seating place information was obtained in the 1970's work by Keith and Anne Chambers: *Mahikava*, and *Te Malie*

(continued, next page...)

Illustration 3.1

Seating in the Āhiga (continued)

II. Chiefly Seating Places



Seats of leading elders in each group are marked by "x"

Notes

Information provided by elders working with Keith Chambers in the 1970's gave contradictory locations for the seating places of the chiefly groups *Alikia a Mua* and *Alikia a Muli*. Taulialia, linked to the *Alikia a Mua* group through a female relative several generations before the 1970's, placed both groups at the two ends of the ahiga, as shown here, but with the order as diagrammed here reversed (he put *Alikia a Mua* on the Lolua side). Malulu, the leading member of the *Te Alikia a Mua* group in the 1970's, provided the seating pattern for his group and *Alikia a Muli* as shown here.

Other information may still come to light to help clarify *Alikia* seating positions, but until then, the information shown here is the best we have.

Chiefly groups for which traditional seating places are now known at this time:
Pologa and *Taualepuku*

māneanea), they have “caught the wind.” A pastor’s sermon might be described this way if it was inspired, and so might a speech in the *āhiga*. In a related way, “wind” can refer to the energy that people put into their contributions to the community. Someone is known by the “wind” he or she brings to their community service. This type of wind applies especially to traditional food gifts that were presented to the whole island, to the *āhiga*. This “wind of people” is named after the main tool used to gather the donated item.

Here is a list of some of these contributions, and the number of items required:

Land Produce [gifts of land produce are termed *mamafa*]

Climbing Loop [*Kāfaga*] – Coconuts, aged coconut, sprouted coconut – 10,000 nuts

Leaf Trimming Pole [*Loulou*] – Sweet husked nuts (*uto*) – 10,000 nuts

Digging Shovel [*Fakaua*] – Pit produce, both pulaka and taro [*mata afe*] – 1000
corms

Sea/Reef Produce [gifts of sea produce are termed *katoa*]

Pearl Shell lure [*te Pā*] – bonito/skipjack tuna [*atu*] – *lau*, 100

Noose [*hele*] – *pāla*, kingfish caught by noosing – *katoa*, 10

Fishhook [*te matau*] – yellow fin tuna, shark, other large fish – *matagafulu*, 10

Long Handled Net [*kau tae*] – flying fish [*hahave*] – 1000 (or 10,000?)

Giant hook [*lou palu*] – castor oil fish [*palu*] – 10

Fishing Noose/Net” [*Kauhele/Kupega*] -- Large fish, both *Pāla* and *Takuo* – 10

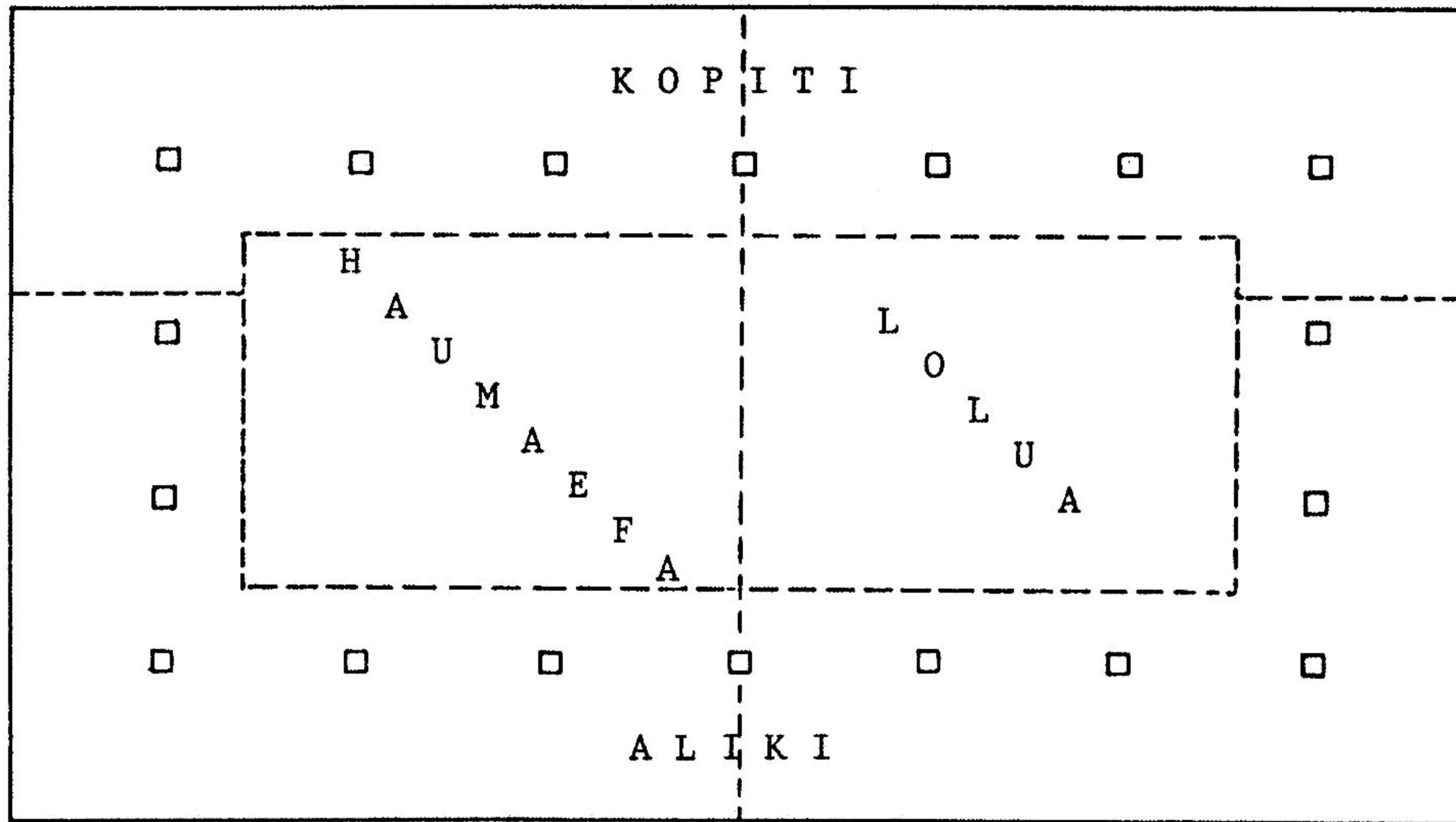
Offering a donation of one or more of the above gifts to the community was done during times of celebration, or in times of drought or other difficulty. Someone who felt he had the ability to do this would offer a donation, or make a wager or promise that he would donate one or more of these resources in the near future to feed the community. One famous story, one which also has a commemorative traditional song, *lautapatapa*, to go with it, tells of Matakea’s donation of his “climbing loop,” *kāfaga* during the time that the community was starving because of a long drought that took place in the 1890’s. Matakea boasted that he would “demolish the ceiling of his attic” and distribute his dried coconut to save the lives of the people of his island, and he did so. Other men recalled as having donated land or sea products in this way include Peniata, Saufo, Malua and Viliamu (*loulou*), Malesa, Tealu, Anania and Peau (*fakaua*). There have also been many fishing captains who displayed their skill and generosity by fishing, especially through the *pā*, although some gave the *Kupega*, *Hele* or *Lou* instead. All these gifts are distributed to the whole community, making the roles of the Tufa and Nifo groups especially needed when a donation like this is received.

There is a way to tell that a fishing captain has caught 100 bonito tuna. When the fishermen return in their canoes from sea, they count their catch as they paddle toward shore. If they have caught 100 bonito, they tie one of the fish on the end of the fishing rod so it can

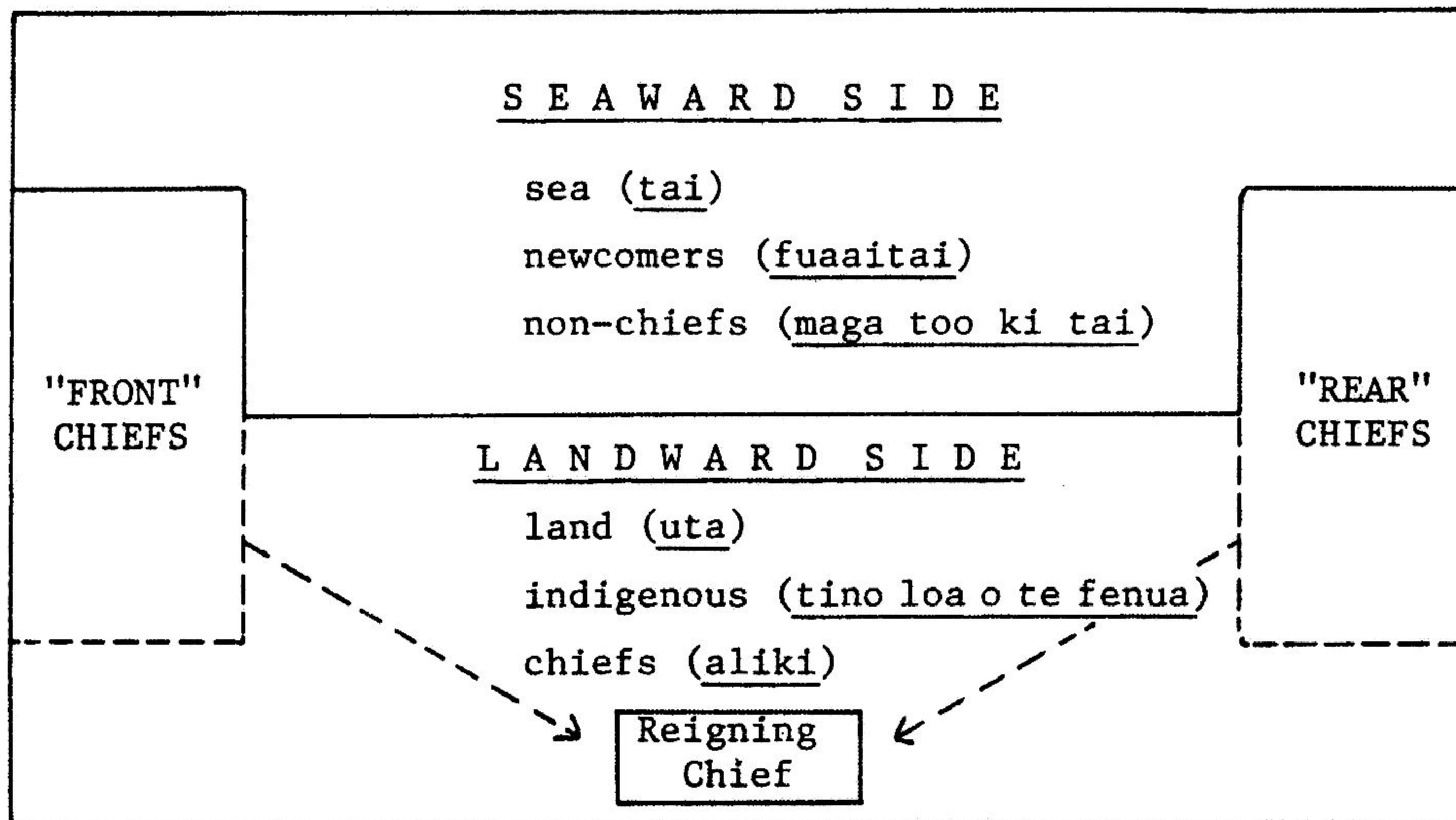
Illustration 3.2

The Ahiga as a Social Map

a) Spatial Divisions



b) Associations



be seen by everyone on shore. People spread the word by calling out to each other, “one of the lures of canoe captain [name] has caught 100 [atu]! – *a te pā o _____ koa katoa!*” When the canoes reach shore, the captain and crew carries their catch to the *āhiga*. Within a short time, women bring refreshments of food and drink in *kete* baskets to welcome back the returning fishermen. Elders walk to the *āhiga* to talk and hear stories of how the captains of each canoe used their fishing rods in the school of bonito. Someone would also go around the village announcing that each household should come to collect its share of fish. Sometimes it is not just a single canoe that would donate its catch to the community – rather, an entire fleet of canoes might decide to do this. If twenty canoes had been out fishing and five of them reached a catch of one hundred, the other canoes would probably have caught 70-80 fish each. The total catch donated to the *āhiga* could be more than one thousand fish.

Making this kind of impressive donation to the community bestows prestige on those who do it. These men achieve positions of respect which are especially evident in their interactions with people at community gatherings in the *āhiga*. Their reputations are enhanced because of what they have done for the island. Those who have not achieved such respected statuses have to be very careful not to talk pretentiously, or one of these men might shame them by saying: “What do you have to be so smart about? What good things have you done for the community? Keep quiet and close your mouth!” The person to whom this was said would have no way to “close” (*pono*) or “cover” (*tao*) this kind of speech from an expert with a status of being “complete,” *katoa*. In situations like this, the *āhiga* could become a place where heated words were exchanged.

Donations of the type described here are seldom made today. However, the spirit of giving for the well-being of the community continues in the many calls for assistance with community development projects. Nanumeans on the home island, in Funafuti, and abroad continually help with donations, most often of money. The amounts expected from each family are now more or less equivalent. But it is still important, just as it was in Matakea’s time, that people not boast or talk about their generosity – they should not “be better than others” (*fiahili*), “show off” (*fakamatamata*) or “act smart” (*fiapoto*).