

Was contention lying just beneath the surface of this apparently peaceful community? Sunema couldn't answer these questions, and, distracted by other activities, we could not pursue them further right away. Work had begun on building our house, and the following day was taken up with preparations for the annual women's celebration, a day in which women take over the meeting house for a day of feasting and dancing.

But as time passed, we increasingly came to appreciate Tefolaha's importance to Nanumea as the root of the community's identity. We were often told the dramatic tale of how he had helped his later descendants overcome a Tongan raiding party led by the giant, Tulaapoupou. We were shown the impressive *Kaumaile*, a six-foot-long spear of dark, hard wood that did not grow locally, reputed to have belonged to Tefolaha himself. A drawing of the spear, used as an emblem by the community, graces the island's letterhead paper and was stamped on movie tickets sold by the Island Council. *Kaumaile* School is the name of Nanumea's primary school, and its two sports teams (and any other division into two groups as may be necessary at school) are invariably named *Pai* and *Vau*, Tefolaha's female adversaries in his conquest of Nanumea.

Early in January every year, Nanumeans fill the community hall for a night of feasting and dancing known as Tefolaha's Day. This celebration began, people say, in 1922 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of missionary activity on Nanumea and to affirm the community's commitment to the Protestant Church. The boisterous holiday has complex overtones: the "children of Tefolaha," who had once worshipped their ancestor as a god and used his blackened skull in important religious rituals, now gather for festivities bearing his name to raise funds for their Christian church. Despite Nanumea's conversion to Christianity, Tefolaha endures as the founding ancestor and symbol of identity in the community he pioneered. To tell and appreciate the story of Tefolaha (or to follow the old practice of pouring onto the ground the last sip in a drinking coconut as an offering to him) is one of the many small gestures that forge the common identity on which Nanumeans draw in their dealings with people from other places, both Westerners and fellow Tuvaluans alike. To recognize and value Tefolaha, we came to realize, was one key to being Nanumean.

The founding myth was also a cornerstone of island politics, with leading families contending over "their" version of the founding, particularly over genealogical issues that establish claims to the chieftainship and the traditional duties allocated to particular descent lines. The Tefolaha story (or stories) was not just a timeless tale of origins, a truth embodied in a single variant. Nanumean traditional narratives had not been compiled in an authoritative edition for people to consult. The founding narratives involved (some might say) fantastic adventures of culture heroes—dra-