

# **Chapter 1**

## **The Island of Nanumea**

Nanumea has been an independent political unit for most of its history. From its founding, up to the time when Britain created a protectorate including Tuvalu with the islands of Kiribati to the north, Nanumea stood alone as a self-governing chieftainship. We know from traditional tales and from similarities in language and culture that the nine islands of Te Atu Tuvalu were in communication with each other for centuries through occasional voyages and visits. The northern islands of Nanumaga and Niutao, which are closest to Nanumea, seem to have been in more regular contact with Nanumea than were the Tuvalu islands further to the south and east. Contacts were not frequent, and each Tuvalu island was an independent place, not united into a “country” or a larger chieftainship spanning several islands.

### **The Nanumean World in Ancient Times**

How long has Nanumea existed as a society? We have no way to be absolutely certain about this, although we can arrive at a rough estimate through several different avenues. Using evidence from scientific sources, we know that the ancestors of the present-day Polynesians voyaged into the Pacific from southeast Asia up to 5000 years ago. These people, speaking languages related to present-day Polynesian languages, moved gradually over several thousand years through Melanesian island groups such as New Britain and New Ireland, and later Vanuatu, reaching Fiji at least 3,200 years ago (this would be at least 1,200 B.C.) Tonga and Samoa were settled after this, and together with Fiji, these three island groups were the core cultural area from which all the islands in what is called Polynesia were settled. Tuvalu has close cultural and linguistic connections to this western group of Polynesian cultures (and more distant links to eastern Polynesian cultures such as Cook Islands, Tahiti, Marquesas, Hawaii and New Zealand).

Because there has been little archaeological work in Tuvalu, it is not possible to use this type of scientific work to date our ancestors’ arrival in Tuvalu. One study says that the low atolls and islands of Tuvalu were not inhabitable by people (because they were not high enough above sea level) before about the year zero. If this is accurate, Tuvalu and Nanumea could not have been settled before this time, so this gives a useful “earliest possible” date for Nanumean settlement. Given the general settlement history of other Polynesian places, we

can estimate that Nanumea and Tuvalu might have been settled as early as around the year zero (some 2000 years ago), though perhaps as late of 1000 or 1,200 AD. One day, especially if archaeologists conduct detailed studies in Tuvalu, we may know the settlement dates with more accuracy.

Many canoe voyages probably brought settlers to live in Tuvalu, not just a single voyage or two. It also seems likely that the north-south chain of atolls making up Tuvalu and the islands of the Gilberts were a sort of voyaging “channel,” visited by many groups of people over time. Some voyagers may have just passed nearby, while others probably stayed to settle down. Tuvalu seems to have been one of the places from which further settlement of many islands in Melanesia and Micronesia took place (these “Polynesian Outliers” include Tikopia, Anuta, West Futuna, Sikaiana, Bellona, Rennell, Ontong Java, Takuu, Nukuoro, Nukumanu, and others). As we know, each Tuvalu island has its own oral traditions about settlement and the people and events this involved. Later in this chapter we will discuss our Nanumean oral traditions about our community’s settlement.<sup>1</sup>

As a relatively isolated community with little regular voyaging to the further islands of Tuvalu, ancient Nanumea developed its own unique version of the wider Polynesian cultural tradition. It also developed a dialect of the Tuvalu language with distinctive vocabulary and intonation patterns, although Tuvaluans from the other islands of the archipelago could understand this dialect, just as Nanumeans could understand theirs.

### **Creation of the Nanumean World**

Societies in every part of the world developed mythological or cosmological stories to explain the origins of the world and gods, people, animals, as well as important features such as death. These stories were considered to be true, and were held to be sacred. In ancient Nanumea, that is, the society of Nanumea as it existed independently and before contact with foreigners from Europe, there were undoubtedly a wealth of these religious traditions. Unfortunately, most of this sophisticated ancient knowledge has been lost. We know that traditional religious practices were one of the first aspects of Nanumean culture to change. Missionaries who came to Nanumea and Tuvalu in the late 1800’s were not tolerant of these earlier traditions. They branded them “things of the devil,” part of the “dark ages” which should be discarded and forgotten.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ron Crocombe’s book *The South Pacific* (2001) provides a useful overview of Pacific settlement, and we have used this as our main reference here. See his Chapter 2, especially pp. 44-48. Keith and Anne Chambers’ book *Unity of Heart* (2001) also summarizes in some detail the evidence for settlement dates for Nanumea (see pp. 60-62).

In response to this very strong condemnation by the early church, most Nanumean elders of that time did not pass on their knowledge of these unique Nanumean religious traditions to their children and grandchildren. These traditions probably included details of the creation of the world and its people and other things, as well as information on the lives and doings of the ancient gods, and the religious practices of our ancestors. All of this information once existed, and formed a rich body of knowledge. This was authentic and ancient tradition, handed down from our ancestors and practiced for centuries before any foreigners came to our shore. Had this material been written down in detail, we would have today a book of sacred writings of the ancestral Nanumeans, a sort of “bible” of the past. But we do not have this. Instead, about all we really know today are the names of some of these gods, the locations of some of the places in Nanumea that were associated with them, and a few fragmentary stories about them. The amount of knowledge that has been lost to us concerning this realm of Nanumean life, thought and philosophy is enormous.

What do we know of ancient Nanumean religion and belief? Since Nanumea and Tuvalu are part of the larger Polynesian culture area, we know that our ancestors shared with other Polynesians the worship of such pan-Pacific gods as Tangaloa. This name, and those of Maumau, Folaha, Maangai, Laukite, Te Feke and Te Lahi, were among the names of gods recorded by early visitors to Nanumea. We know that there were shrines or temples for each of these major gods (in one report Maumau was said to have two temples), that these shrines sometimes took the form of very large upright coral slabs, up to 9 feet high and from 2 to 6 feet wide. We do not know if these shrines were in the center of the village, or in some special place. One early report implies that the area where shrines to the major gods were worshipped was outside the village, perhaps near where today’s main cemetery is. But we do not know for sure.

We know that we had people with special knowledge and abilities who led ritual activities. These people, who seem to have been women as well as men, may have been called Vakaatua, “vessels of the gods.” They communicated with the gods and made offerings to them, offerings which included the all-important staff of life, the coconut. The skulls of important ancestors were preserved and used in religious rites too. Tefolaha’s own skull was preserved and used in religious ceremonies. Individual families also preserved the skulls of important ancestors and kept these in special shrines inside or near their houses. Such family skulls were called *Atuaafale*. They were cared for and spoken to, and it is said they could help the family solve problems and warn them in times of danger. In the main village area, there were special places that were associated with ancient gods, including a

land parcel called Te Alatau Tapu (also called Uma) near where the present day church is and others with names such as Te Ofaga o Maumau, Te Ofaga o Laukite, and Te Ofaga o Telahi. Possibly there were special shrines or beliefs associated with these specific gods.<sup>2</sup>

We also know that Nanumea (and neighboring Nanumaga) had a unique religious practice which was apparently designed to protect the island from evil influences and diseases brought by outsiders. These rituals probably had a name, but if so, it has been forgotten today. Apparently a kind of religious quarantine and cleansing, the rites took place at the ocean beach near the village. Foreigners were required to remain on the sandy shore for up to a whole day while songs, chants and dances were performed to cleanse them. In these rites, the major gods of Nanumea, including Tefolaha, were probably being asked to protect the island. There is a very interesting and detailed description of these rituals in Nanumea, written in 1853 by Henry Pease, captain of a U.S. whaling ship called *Planter*.<sup>3</sup> Early missionary visitors to Nanumea also left useful, though short, records of the rituals, and mention the names of the main gods and describe their shrines. Captain Pease's visit is discussed further in Chapter 4 below.

What do we know today of ancient Nanumean beliefs about the origin of the world and the creation of people, animals and other things? Sadly, very little. The belief shared among many ancient Pacific islands societies, and especially those in Polynesia, was that the world was originally a dark and very cramped place. The world as we now know it originated when one or more of the gods separated the earth and the heavens by lifting up the heavens, letting in light and allowing more space. In some versions of this story the top and bottom parts are made of a giant clam shell, the top of which became the sky, the bottom part the earth.

Did Nanumea have a traditional belief about the creation of the world by raising the sky? Yes, we did, and we include here several fragmentary versions. This first story was told by Taulialia and recorded by Keith and Anne Chambers at Nanumea in 1974:

This is a story of ancient times, from the “dark ages,” about the separation of the earth and the sky. All of the *aitu* of the world, spirits such as Maumau, Laukite, Naleau, Nakaa, Taulialia, and Tapualiki gathered to try to separate the earth and the sky. One by one each tried to shoulder the sky up but each one failed to reach high enough, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Most people in Nanumea and Tuvalu refer to these old gods as *aitu*. We have used the word *atua* here to make clear to readers that these were the original gods of our island, and that they were called *atua*, not *aitu*. Today, our use of this word has changed to reflect the fact that *Atua* usually refers to the Christian God.

<sup>3</sup> Pease's account was published in 1854, and reprinted in 1962 (Pease 1854, Pease 1962). Keith Chambers' *Heirs of Tefolaha* (1984, pp. 270-76) excerpts many details from Pease's and some early missionary accounts of religious practice.

sat down. Finally came Māgai, the rainbow. He lifted, calling out to the other spirits: “how is it, spirits?” Several times they told him to lift “a little bit more” and he kept lifting. He lifted it into place and left it. And so today the sky is up there in place, because Māgai lifted it. They say he is the very tallest of the spirits.

Another very short version of this story was told to Keith and Anne at Nanumea in 1974 by Tongia, who remembered hearing it from his grandmother Laisa. Tangisia Kilei has amplified Tongia’s tale based on his own family’s tradition:

Originally the sky and the earth were touching. The ali fish tried to lift up the sky. The sky crashed down on him, and this is why the ali has a flat body today. The eel came along to help the ali, and lifted the sky right up to its proper position. Today one can see the eel stretching across the sky as Te Kaniva, The Milky Way.

Finally, another more detailed version was written down in about 1920 by Arthur Grimble, a well-known British colonial administrator who was based in Tarawa. He may have visited Nanumea, or he may have gotten this from a Nanumean (whose name is not recorded) living in Tarawa:

Nanomea islanders say that in the beginning heaven and earth were sticking together. Heaven was called Rangi and Earth Papa. They were things, not persons. Between heaven and earth lived two beings, Laukite and Manaia [Māgai], the rainbow. Tangaroa was walking on the overside of heaven and heard these two beings complaining that there was no light. He called to them, “what is it that you want?” They answered, “Lift heaven that we may have light.” So Tangaroa lifted it and Mangaia [Māgai] the Rainbow helped him.

When heaven stood on high Tangaroa the creator lived there and Laukite accompanied him. There they await and welcome the spirits of the dead.

Laukite had two sons. The elder named Maumau sprang from his belly. The younger named Nareau from a swelling on his forehead. Nareau was very small but wise.<sup>4</sup>

This type of belief is generally known as a “Sky Raising” myth. In some other Polynesian versions of this myth the top part, Langi, is a male, while the lower part, Papa, is a female. The god who does the raising is sometimes a trickster figure.

These Nanumean stories are incomplete, and we do not have much else to go on besides this. We do not know, for instance, if our Nanumean ancestors believed that Nanumea itself was formed this way when the sky was raised, or if all of Tuvalu was, or if

---

<sup>4</sup> The story Arthur Grimble collected appears in his manuscript papers copied by the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (Canberra, Australia), microfilm PMB 69, item H74. Grimble’s materials date from the period 1916-1930. We have estimated a date of 1920, but the story could date from any time in the period 1916-1930. The person who told it to Grimble is not known.

this was a story about the creation of the whole world. We are not sure if Nanumean beliefs held that all these gods were related to each other, and which ones were the “higher” or more important gods and which the lesser. Nor do we know how these earlier religious beliefs may have been connected with the starting place for Nanumea’s beginnings as we know it today, the story of Pai and Vau, and the coming to their island of Tefolaha.

### **The Undersea World**

Besides the world above (both the earth and the sky), our ancestors believed in an undersea world which was populated by beings who ruled there. We do not have room in the book for all such stories, but here are some short summaries:

Hina and Pakeva are the rulers, the gods, of the sea. When they sleep they use the atu for their pillows. They rest their legs on the shark. As a result, the flesh of sharks smells like urine, because Hina and Pakeva urinate during their sleep. Because of this smell, not everyone likes shark flesh, particularly when it is eaten raw. If cooked, it is all right, the odor is gone. By contrast, the flesh of the atu is the most desired of all. This has no urine odor, and the flesh is red and nice.

In another story, which we won’t summarize in full,

A Nanumean fisherman, Hinoki, travels to the undersea world of Hina and Pakeva to seek his lost paa.

In yet another story:

Kautuaia is taken by Pakeva (who comes ashore in a blood-red wave) to his undersea world as punishment for catching too many atu, Pakeva’s favorite fish. Kautuaia escapes with the aid of some small fish.

Our final story is about the bringing back from the undersea world of many kinds of important knowledge. It was narrated for this book by Tangisia Kilei:

This story is about a boy, Tikitiki, who was about 14 or 15 years old. He was really bad looking, skinny, with swollen legs and sores all over his body. His favorite pastime was to sit on the beach and drum on his kapa, biscuit tin drum. People would tell him to stop, because it was hurting their ears, but he would not listen. One day a person came along, grabbed Tikitiki, stuffed him and his two drumsticks into an empty coconut shell, and threw him into the sea. He had not drifted far out to sea when a whale [or porpoise] came along and swallowed the coconut shell. Tikitiki came out of his coconut shell in the stomach of the whale. He used his two drumming sticks to poke the whale’s stomach. The whale could not stand the pain in his stomach, so he went down to see Hina and Pakeva (gods of the undersea world).

Hina instructed the whale to visit the medical clinics which were divided up [and located] under the different rafters of the building. Under each rafter section [*inaki*]

was a specialist in charge of one type of important knowledge, out of the many types of knowledge gathered in the building. (Each type of knowledge had its own procedures and also its chants or calls to the different gods or spirits which were connected to each specialty.)

The whale went to the first rafter division to see about his illness. At each clinic visited by the whale, [Tikitiki] stole the special knowledge there. At the first clinic, the whale's illness could not be cured, so he went on to all the other clinics in turn. None of them could help him with his illness. "Well, said Hina, you will need to return to your desert [??]. When the whale had left and they closed the door to the house, they were really surprised, and realized that something had happened. They were really sad because now he was stronger than they were.

The whale beached himself on the reef area of the island, and a voice cried out, "Whale, open up your mouth!" And out jumped our fellow [Tikitiki] with his two drumsticks in his hands. Tikitiki got in his canoe made of a coconut sheath and went from island to island, including the islands of Kiribati (where the knowledge of lau/tapunea was left), Tuvalu, and other islands of the Pacific, including islands in Micronesia and Melanesia, and Europe and Asia. Tikitiki was famous for his knowledge of magical fighting called *Lima fai alaga*. So he went on to pay back what had been done to him, having been thrown to sea and set adrift. People everywhere were amazed at his great knowledge.

It is clear from these few examples that the world our Nanumean ancestors lived in was one rich in knowledge. The sky, the sea, and the land were places where the ancient gods dwelled, and about whom there was detailed knowledge and many stories which explained their world and their activities.

### **Te Tagata ko Tefolaha**

As we all know, today when we talk about the beginnings of Nanumea, we do not usually think of raising the sky, or of our ancient gods such as Tangaloa, Maumau, Te Lahi or Pākeva, but of two women named Pai and Vau and their encounter with a very clever man by the name of Tefolaha. While we all know that Tefolaha is the founder of the island of Nanumea, we are not sure exactly when he may have come to Nanumea. The best estimate we can make uses the number of generations in genealogies tracing descent from Tefolaha down to the present generation. This genealogical method of dating is done by assigning an average number of years to a generation, and then multiplying the number of generations. For this estimate to be accurate, three things are needed:

- the number of generations from Tefolaha to the present day must be known;
- the genealogies must be exactly remembered, with no names forgotten and no extra names added;

- the number of years used in calculating the length of a generation must be realistic, that is, they must fit with the actual age a man would normally be when he has his first son.

As we can imagine, it may not always be possible to know each of these things for sure. Also, there have been many studies done overseas in various societies trying to assess the validity of using genealogies for dating. Most of these studies have shown that because genealogies are often used for political purposes, their content has usually been manipulated. Thus, genealogies are not usually a fully reliable way to date the past, but they can give a general sense of the past. How, then, can we use genealogical information to arrive at a date for Tefolaha?

If we use a number of about 20 years per generation (each male is about 20 years old when his first child is born), then one can estimate that Tefolaha (or as he was called in Samoa, Folasaitu, or in Kiribati, Teborata), lived sometime in the period 1400 to about 1500 A.D. (It is about 28 generations since Tefolaha, and using 20 years between generations). It is important for us to remember that this is only a rough estimate, and the actual date could be far different than this.

### **This Island is Mine!**

Nanumean traditional tales tell us that Nanumea was created by two women named Pai and Vau. They flew through the air with their *loulou* picking stick and their *kete* basket of sand, which spilled out at each place they came to, and from which grew an island. It is not known for sure how long the two women lived here, but it must have been long enough for vegetation necessary to build a house to grow up, and for growth of the fragrant flowers they used to braid their head wreaths. Or perhaps the original island that they created had all those plants on it from the beginning.

Tefolaha was a famous warrior from Tonga.<sup>5</sup> He had a spirit [*aitu*] side as well as a human side. He lived at the time when the various Pacific island countries were at war, especially the islands of Tonga, Samoa and Fiji. In his travels, Tefolaha reached the Tuvalu archipelago, and came here to the island of Nanumea. He noticed the beauty of the island and wanted it for his own. He really thought that there were no other people on the island, but he noticed a human footprint on the beach and followed the foot steps, and came to a

---

<sup>5</sup> There are different opinions about Tefolaha's origins. Some Nanumean elders say he was originally from Tonga, while others say he was a Samoan. This issue is discussed more fully toward the end of Chapter 2.

house where two women were braiding flower head wreaths. Tefolaha asked them what they were doing on his island. The two women replied that the island was theirs. A bit later, Tefolaha changed to his *aitu* nature and disappeared up in the rafters of the house, sitting right above where the two women were braiding head wreaths.

He let down a tiny *leti* right over the head of the first woman, who cried out to her friend at her side: “Hey Pai! There is something that is about to touch your head!” So Tefolaha pulled the *leti* up again.<sup>6</sup> He did this again over the head of the other woman, and Pai cried out: “Hey Vau! There it is again coming down, and just about touching your head!” Tefolaha tossed away the *leti* and went quickly down from the attic. He was invisible, but changed to his human nature and turned to our women there, and said: “Maybe we should do something to decide whose this island really is?” “What would that something be?” asked the two women. “Look, if you two know my name, I’ll believe that this island is really yours. And I’ll just leave your island then. But if I am able to guess your names, then you should be the ones to leave the island, because it will really be mine then.” Our two women were caught be surprise. They looked this way and that. They did know have any idea what to do. Before long, Tefolaha, went on: “Well, do you two know my name?”

The two women were crestfallen and started to cry, and said, “No, we do not know your name; but do you know our names?” Tefolaha stared right at them and said, “Your name is Pai, and you are Vau. So probably you two should just go ahead and do what we agreed, and get your things ready and leave my island.” So the two women, Pai and Vau, left with great sadness the island that was theirs.

Some Nanumean stories tell us that Pai and Vau left Nanumea in tears, dragging their picking stick (*loulou*) behind them. As they went, the stick cut a groove in the reef flat of Nanumea, something which can still be seen there on the eastern ocean reef. Sand spilled from their baskets and formed the smaller islets in Nanumea’s lagoon. Pai and Vau went on north to toward the Gilbert Islands, and some say they also formed those islands from spilled sand in the same way they did Nanumea. There is another interesting fact about Pai and Vau. People commonly say that they have heard that these two were *Faafine Hauai*, which most people think refers to their being “Hawaiian Women.” It seems more likely to us that the phrase *Faafine Hauai* once had another meaning which has become confused over time. In

---

<sup>6</sup> The *leti* (or *loko*, the name many Nanumeans are familiar with) is a small yellow worm, about 10mm long by 1 mm wide, which sticks to or hangs down from a bit of spider web, whose top end is connected to the rib of a coconut frond. This little worm hangs down to about 4 or 5 feet above the ground. If you touch it, it wiggles back up the web, but a bit later, it comes down again. So they tell us that the *leti* or *loko* was part of the trick used by Tefolaha against the two women.

the Tokelau Islands, the phrase *faafine hauai* means female ogres, supernatural women who may eat human flesh. There are many stories about this type of woman. Tokelau and Tuvalu are very similar in language and culture. So we believe it is likely that Pai and Vau were supernatural beings of this type, and not from Hawaii at all. It may well be that once George Holomoana had come to live in Nanumea in about the 1850's people became more familiar with the islands of Hawaii, George's homeland. In that case, the story of Pai and Vau could have changed slightly over time, with the word *hauai*, which once meant ogre, coming simply to refer to the islands of Hawaii.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Origin of the Nanumeans**

Once Pai and Vau left, Tefolaha had possession of Nanumea. It is interesting to wonder who else was on the island with him? Had he come all the way to Nanumea alone, or was he with his crew? Were there gods or spirits living on the island, and could he relate to them by changing to his spirit nature? Our traditional tales don't tell us much about these issues. We also don't know how long Tefolaha remained on Nanumea on this first visit, but some traditional Nanumean tales do tell us that Tefolaha married Laukite.

Who was Laukite? While some Nanumean elders we consulted say this woman was an *aitu* or *feao*, a ghost or spirit, we have seen at the start of this chapter that Laukite is also named as one of the major gods our ancestors worshiped; she was an *atua*. It is important to remember that when the earliest outside visitors came to Nanumea they were also told that Tefolaha was one of Nanumea's gods. Thus, some reflection about this important founding story will make it clear that Nanumea began with the marriage of Tefolaha and Laukite, two of our major ancient gods. One well-known version of this story continues, saying that Tefolaha and Laukite had five children, all of them girls. Their names were Koli, Finehau, Nenefu, Lei and Moega. The story says that four of the girls had faces like an animal, and they were cannibalistic too. So all of them were killed. Out of the five children, only Koli was spared, since she looked like a person, though her mouth was like a fish, the *pāla* fish.

There are other versions of how Nanumeans descend from Tefolaha, however, which involve a fully human woman named Puleala as the mother of Tefolaha's children. One well-

---

<sup>7</sup> Almost all Nanumeans say that it was Pai and Vau who argued with Tefolaha, and who were forced to leave the island they made. However, there are a few stories we have heard which name the two women Tefolaha tricked as Ila and Noko. If anyone has more information on this story, and the names Ila and Noko, we ask them to share it with us so that this story is not lost.

known version involving Puleala goes as follows. After Pai and Vau left, Tefolaha returned to Tonga and there he married Puleala (whose other name was Tauaho), a real person. Before long, Tefolaha wanted to return to Nanumea. He left with his wife, the brother of his wife named Tetea, together with family members of these two. They returned to Samoa to get some of Tefolaha's friends, and also two young Samoan women, and to continue the voyage on to Nanumea. On this voyage with his second wife, three boy children were born to her and Tefolaha. Their names were Tutaki, Fiaola and Lavega. Nanumea's people descend from these boys and their sister Koli, Tefolaha's first child with his first wife Laukite (there are also stories which say that Teilo and Tepaa were half brothers of Koli).

There is still one further version to consider, however. In this version, Koli's mother is not Laukite but rather the fully human woman named Puleala, and thus Koli herself is the full-sibling of the three sons of Tefolaha, Tutaki, Fiaola and Lavega. This story seems to combine several aspects of the previous two stories in an interesting way.

In Chapter 2, we will take up the very complicated story of Tefolaha's children and the lineages they founded. Here, it is enough to say that Koli, Tefolaha's only surviving daughter, is very important in this story: Koli lives on, marries, and her descendants become a lineage with a special role to play. As the only daughter (or as the only surviving daughter) of Tefolaha, Koli can be expected to have a special relationship with her brothers. And the three sons of Tefolaha themselves, Tutaki, Fiaola and Lavega, figure even more prominently in the development of Nanumea and its chiefly lineages. Two other figures of importance are Teilo and Tepaa. We will return to consider all these people and their connections to Nanumea's chiefly traditions in Chapter 2. Here, it is enough to introduce these people. Let's focus now on the island itself. Where is Nanumea, and what is it like?

### **Te Fenua mo tona Fakatulagaga**

Nanumea stands alone as one of the nine islands of Tuvalu, all located in the central-south Pacific in the cultural region known as Polynesia. Nanumea is the northernmost of the Tuvalu islands, and is thus close to Kiribati. Its location on the map is at 5.39 degrees south latitude, 176.08 degrees east longitude. Nanumea is thus fairly close to the equator. It is about 470km (290 miles) northwest of the capital, Funafuti. The island including its sand beaches is about 13km or 8.2 miles long, by 2.7 km or 1.6 miles wide. Its land area, including Nanumea proper and the islets of Lakena, Te Motu Foliki, Lafogaki and Teafua-a-Taepoa is 3.8 sq. km., or 1.46 sq. miles. (See Illustration 1.1) Nanumea is shaped somewhat like the letter "Y." Its lovely lagoon is from 20 to 30 meters deep, stretching from Te Faga to

the near tip of Lakena. Of the many coral outcrops in the lagoon, most are covered at high tide and reappear at low tide.

Before Europeans came, there were no large passes into the Nanumean lagoon from the sea. Our ocean-going and fishing canoes had to be taken out very carefully over the ocean reef. When European ships began to visit us, their boats carrying cargo and people had a difficult time getting through the waves and across the rough reef to the shore. In about 1930, the British Colonial administration, under the supervision of Donald Kennedy, blasted a pass in the coral reef right in front of the village. This pass, "Kennedy's Pass," was helpful in the time when ships came, in bringing passengers and cargo ashore and back out to the ship. It was used for ten or fifteen years before the Americans came to Nanumea during World War II, in the period 1942-'45. They blasted a new and deeper pass, from the ocean right through into the lagoon. This pass was able to take lighters and rafts carrying cargo and war materials, in time to prevent the enemy [Japan] from landing. This pass was located at the western tip of the islet of Nanumea, near where today's hospital is located. This "American Pass", as it is known, is about 20 meters wide by 200 meters in length. Its main use is when cargo ships come from Funafuti, since it greatly simplifies the carrying of cargo and passengers in launches and small boats, without their getting wet. Sailboats (yachts) can also enter Nanumea's lagoon, to rest or to take shelter in the storm season. Despite its beauty, the pass has its dangers, especially when it flows fast out to sea (the tide is going down) or when the wind stands offshore to the north or west (westerly storm season). At these times waves can break at the seaward mouth of the pass, making it hard to bring cargo or passengers in or out. Even in these situations, however, real Nanumean sea captains are able to use the pass, since they know it well. For these reasons (waves, fast current), specialized reef-blasting teams have come several times from New Zealand in recent years to deepen and widen the pass and have succeeded in reducing the problem of breaking waves, as well as the shore erosion that was taking place on the ocean shore of the village.

The island's weather is normally good throughout the year. The Trade Wind is generally steady from the east, and rain falls at regular intervals. Nevertheless, there are months at the end of the year and into the start of the new year in which there are fierce storms throughout all of Tuvalu. The winds shift to the west and may reach a velocity of 50-60 miles per hour, with considerable damage to the island's houses and vegetation. A group known as the Volunteers helps people whose houses are in the path of the wind to build storm [wind] barriers to protect their houses.

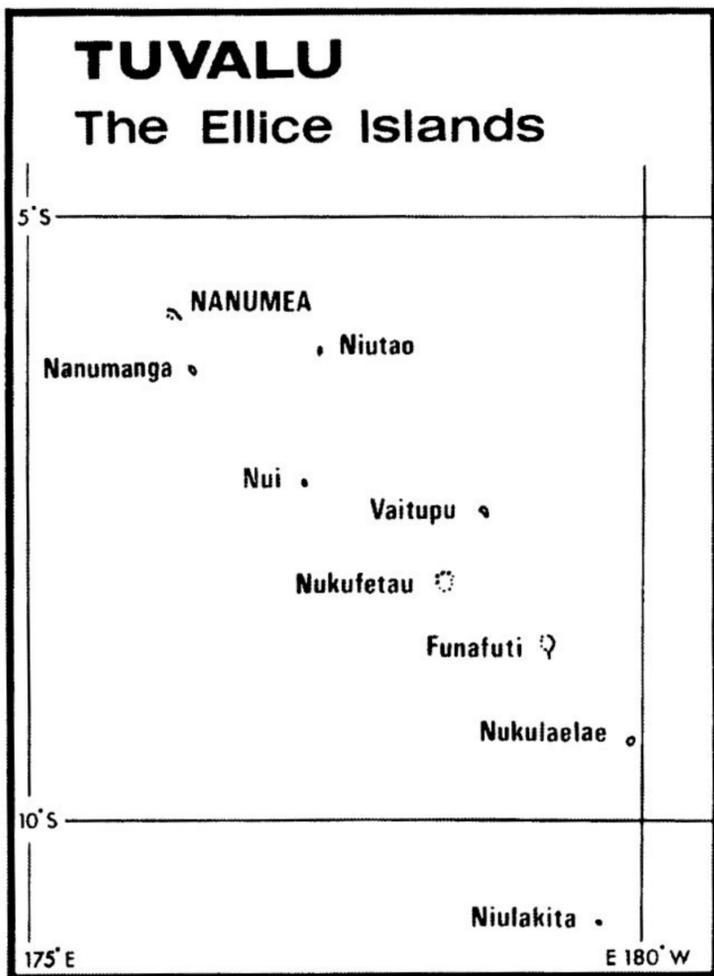
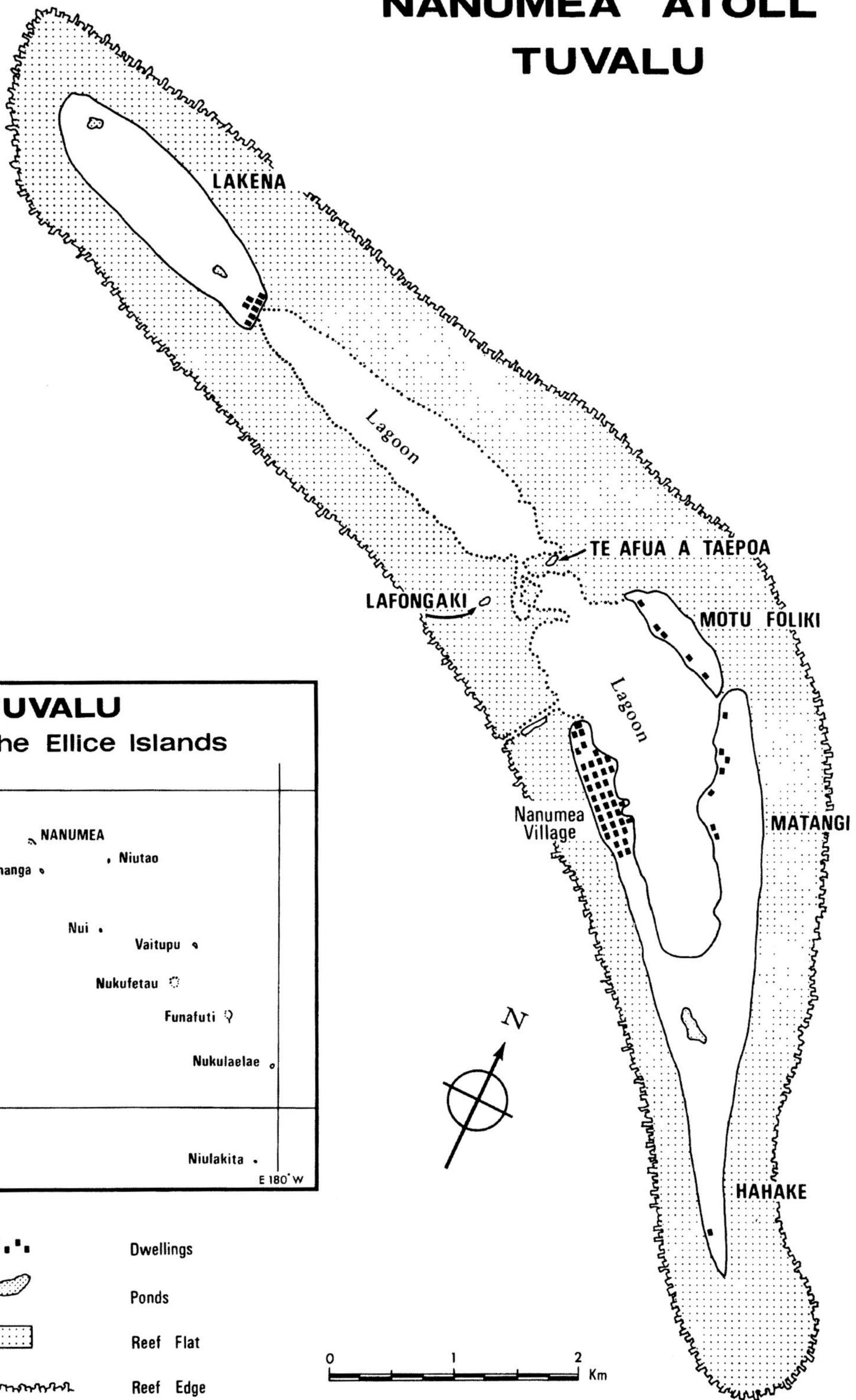
In the 1950's and 1960's, the number of people resident in Nanumea was more than a thousand. This was because in those days, even though there were people away working at Banaba and Nauru, most Nanumeans lived on the island. But starting in the 1970's and to the present time, there have not been one thousand people living in Nanumea, primarily because of people's mobility. According to the 2002 census, Nanumea's population had dropped to 669 in 2002. Only a few people returned to Nanumea from Banaba when phosphate mining ended there – many went on to Nauru, in addition to some who went to New Zealand. Another reason for the lower population on Nanumea is the flow of people to the capital, Funafuti, looking for work and a way to pay their children's school fees in today's changed world. There are probably more Nanumeans than there are people from other small islands in the Pacific, especially when we consider the Nanumeans living in New Zealand, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Nauru and Kiribati, in addition to the other islands of Tuvalu. We estimate that all together there are probably over 2000 Nanumeans.

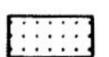
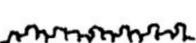
### **The Islet of Lakena**

The islet of Lakena is just over half the size of Nanumea itself, with 119 hectares of land. See Illustration 1.1. It is on this islet that all the taro pits of Nanumea are located. In these pits both Pulaka and taro are planted. In the old days, within any week, it was up to the individual when he or she went to work in the his taro pits in Lakena, to plant and compost taro beds, and to do other garden work, including picking stalks of bananas when ripe, picking clusters of ripe fala, or catching paieka crabs. Today, however, Friday has been selected as the special day in which the majority of family heads go to Lakena to harvest pulaka for use on Saturday and Sunday. From the rich soil of Lakena come healthy plants, including the large trees such as fetau, puka and fala used in making canoes and in house building, and other valuable things useful in the household.

Right in the midst of Lakena, close to the village, is a freshwater lake known as Te Koko. Older men often rest here, stopping with their baskets of pulaka to smoke or bathe in the pond on their way back from the bush to the village. Afterwards they continue on to the front end of Lakena, carrying their digging spades and baskets of pulaka on their backs. If your taro pits are quite a ways into the bush, you might have had to carry your basket of pulaka a mile in order to get back to the shore. In days past, canoes were the only way to get back and forth to Lakena or to the Matagi side of the island. Canoes going to Lakena were favored with the wind nicely placed, and could put up their sails and sail downwind.

# NANUMEA ATOLL TUVALU



-  Dwellings
-  Ponds
-  Reef Flat
-  Reef Edge



If the wind is contrary when it is time for the canoes to return to Nanumea, no matter how tired you might be from carrying your baskets of pulaka from the bush, you still have to get back home to Nanumea, whether you paddle your canoe down the middle of the lagoon or pole along on the side. You try to get back to Nanumea while it is still daylight, since you still have your regular chores to do: feeding of pigs and the evening's cutting of kaleve syrup, and this is not the end of it. You still need to do some evening fishing to have something to accompany your pulaka for the next day, and so you won't be able to rest until after midnight. It does not matter how tired you might be from going to Lakena, men of the old days agreed that it was forbidden to plant taro and pulaka on Nanumea itself, for one reason. Because when it came time to rest from your work, and there were many nights like that, we would be able to sleep peacefully and not be bothered by those fearsome and useless creatures, namely the mosquitoes. Because there were no mosquito nets in those days.

But look at the situation today in going to Lakena. We rely on the easy "paddle" of the Europeans, and passengers on the catamaran can take their cards and play games on the way to Lakena, they can take their bicycles, and a change of clothes in a plastic bag. When it comes time to return from working in the taro pits, one can rest in Te Koko pond and go to swim in the ocean pool at the tip of Lakena. Afterwards, you change your clothes and chat while sitting on the pleasant sands of Lakena, waiting for the return trip of the catamaran. It does not matter where the wind is. Gone are all thoughts of paddles and poling poles. It is only a matter of hopping on the catamaran, folding your arms, crossing your legs and waiting until you get to Nanumea. Arriving home, you prepare your pigs' food, drive off on your motorbike to the bush to feed them. When you return, you prepare your fishing gear, put your outboard engine on your boat, and go out to fish for flying fish. Everything is done in a short time without much effort. We can see the huge changes that have happened in the past 30 to 40 years.

### **Symbols of the Community's Identity**

As a community, Nanumea has a range of markers which identify it as unique, and which usually have historical roots. Here are some of these special markers of Nanumean identity.

#### **Kaumaile spear**

The fighting spear known as Te Kaumaile is widely considered by Nanumeans to be a key symbol of Nanumean identity. Believed to have been brought to Nanumea by Tefolaha, passed to his son Tutaki, and later used by Tutaki's descendant Lapi to defeat the giant,

Tulapoupou, the Kaumaile is today in the possession of a family which descends from Lapi. The spear, made from a dense, nearly black wood, is almost six feet long. It has a distinctive wide blade and point. The emblem of this spear is used by Nanumeans as a motif on clothing, stationary, and even on the official stamp of Nanumea's aliki. It is the name of the primary school at Nanumea, Kaumaile School.

### **Nanumea's stamp used by the Alik**

Nanumea's high chief, its Alik or Pulefenua, is the only one entitled to use the official seal of Nanumea. This seal or stamp is round, and included in its motifs is a drawing of the Kaumaile spear. This is, clearly, a powerful symbol of Nanumea and its long tradition of leadership from Tefolaha onward.

### **“Tefolaha Your Partner” and “Children of Tefolaha”**

Another historical connection which helps Nanumeans focus their identity is the phrase, “Tefolaha tou hoa!” referring to the words Lapi used when he called on Tefolaha to help him defeat Tulapoupou. He was able to defeat the giant, in part because the guiding spirit (and power) of Tefolaha came to him after he uttered these words. Today, one sees this phrase on shirts and other clothing (such as the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary tee shirts made and worn by the Nanu-Futi Talavou in October, 2003 in Funafuti), and Nanumeans and others know that it and sometimes say it to each other jokingly.

Did you know that the niu, the coconut, was a plant sacred to the ancient gods of Nanumea? It is interesting to know that in some small ways we still remember the importance of the niu (besides the fact that we love to eat it, to make many wonderful dishes using its flavorings, and of course to feed our pigs with it). Did you ever get down to the last small amount of pi in your drinking nut, and then pour our the last bit on the ground, saying “Tefolaha tou hoa!” This seems to be a way to remember that Tefolaha, our founder, was someone we made a special place in our hearts for, and to whom we were willing to give things. Many older Nanumeans still do this.

We also use a related saying, referring to ourselves as “Tama a Tefolaha” in some circumstances, or, less-commonly, as mokopuna of Tefolaha. This saying again reminds us of our important ancestor and that all Nanumeans are related at some level by this important connection.

### **Reputation – “Coconut Eaters”**

Many people say that Nanumeans like to eat coconut more than some other Tuvaluans. Whether this is true or not, this phrase is jokingly used by Nanumeans and others to refer to us.

### **Pai and Vau as competitive units**

We have met Pai and Vau above, and know that they were the losers in a contest of wits with Tefolaha. In fact, they don't seem to have been very smart at all, and they gave up the island pretty easily. Would you have given away all your hard work in making an island, just for a bet? Regardless of your thoughts about this, we all know that our favorite names for two teams whenever we divide up to play a game is Pai and Vau. This is done regularly at the Kaumaile Primary School in Nanumea, and in events held in Seimeana Ahiga in Funafuti. Pai and Vau were not very smart perhaps, but we remember, and use their names frequently.

### **Distinctive handicrafts**

Nanumea is well known for the quality and distinctive nature of many of the handmade items it produces. Some of these are beginning to be copied and used by people on other Tuvalu islands. Among our distinctive handicrafts and products:

- Nanumean head wreaths
- other Nanumean traditional body decorations
- coconut oil scented with ponuponu
- skirts such as titi galegale (or fakagalegale) and titi fakamanumanu
- what other distinctive products can you add to this list?