

This brief note, and a later missionary comment apparently echoing it (Newell 1895:610), is the only indication I have seen that Tefolaha was venerated outside of Nanumea. Two people from Arorae who were resident in Nanumea in 1984 told me that they had never heard of "Borata" but, since most knowledge of archaic religious practice has been lost today in both Tuvalu and Kiribati, this is not surprising. As we have seen, Nanumean traditions speak of occasional contacts with Kiribati, particularly recounting invasions from those islands. There are also some Kiribati loan words in Nanumean today but the true extent of former contacts remains largely unknown.

Accommodation with the Church

Of all of Nanumea's traditional gods, only Tefolaha still retains a position of honor in contemporary Nanumea. His successful secularization seems to have been achieved partly through a remarkable accommodation between church officials and those Nanumeans who still preferred to worship their own gods. By 1922 there was still a significant pagan faction in Nanumea which continued to hold to at least some of the old religious practices. But this was the year marking the 50th jubilee of the establishment of Christianity on Nanumea, and the L.M.S. was accustomed to mark this milestone in a grand way. According to informants today, the island's pastor felt that the existence of a pagan faction marred this celebration. In eloquent speeches he urged that Nanumea make its 50th jubilee truly a time of rejoicing by giving up, once and for all, the old gods. Under pressure from the community, the conservatives agreed to do so. The festivities were marked by erecting a cement monument in the center of the village near the ahiga

and by a feast in the hall. But unlike other feasts, these celebrations continued into an all-night function as people danced, ate, and contributed money to the church in repeated trips to a small table set up to hold the plates of coins. Each village side competed to see which could contribute the most before dawn.

The remarkable thing about this boisterous holiday, which has continued to be celebrated in this same fashion yearly on January 8th, the anniversary of Samoan pastor Tuilouaa's landing⁷ in stealth on Nanumea, is that it was named after Nanumea's preeminent pagan god, Tefolaha: this is the annual "Day of Tefolaha" (te Po o Tefolaha). If the community had at last relinquished its founder as a god, it retained his memory and significance in other areas of life and, with rich irony, commemorated his name by associating it with this day on which his descendants accepted the new religion.

The ancestral skulls which played so large a part in traditional religious practice, and possibly also the skull of the founder himself, had been buried in a public ceremony in Nanumea in 1874.⁸ A century later, though, Nanumeans again found themselves concerned with the remains of the founding father. The circumstances surrounding the search for the bones of Tefolaha illuminate the continuing importance of this man and former god, and what he stands for to Nanumeans. Tefolaha's bones also provided the stimulus that brought the long-standing disagreement between Tepou and Takitua over their respective tales of Nanumea's origins briefly to center stage in a series of encounters in the ahiga.

4. (con't) a Mr. McClure at the phosphate works in Banaba. This man, Manuella, claimed the spear and it was given to him to return it to Nanumea. This was about 1925. In the mid 1930's Manuella returned to Nanumea, bringing the spear with him and it has remained there to this day. People are not generally clear as to why the spear was taken or why Nanumeans were willing to give it up. But the present "owner," the adopted son of Manuella, says that while it was gone, the Kaumaile was taken to a museum in England and was there judged to be about 800 years old.
5. There is little information on how this was done in Nanumea, but for Nanumaga, which seems to have had very similar religious practices, a missionary report (Pratt 1872) is graphic:

The teacher told us of a practice which I could not credit till I had asked a chief, and he at once confirmed it both by words and signs. When a chief dies, or even a much loved head of a family, he is buried; but on the third day his head is taken up, and the flesh is gnawed off and eaten (with cocoanut), raw and stinking by his children. Then the skull is preserved.

Nearly a hundred years later, informants in Nanumaga told anthropologist Gerd Koch (1962:50) that the skull was unearthed three days after burial by the eldest daughter of the lineage head. It was then cleaned by her in the lagoon before being placed in the shrine (fale o atua, "god house").

6. This word is formed from three morphemes: atua, "god," a, "of," and fale, "house." Hence, "household god." The term is archaic in Nanumea and not widely known. Some speakers shorten it to tuaafale, possibly not recognizing in it the root atua. Today the gods of old are usually referred to as aitu (spirit, ghost) rather than atua, probably because Atua has come to refer to the Christian God.
7. Tuilouaa landed on January 8th, 1873 (Powell 1878). In calculating the date of the Jubilee, people must have counted fifty years from 1872, however, perhaps starting from this year because by then a small Christian community had been established on the island. There is considerable oral tradition today surrounding the eventual establishment of the church and the influential actions of several Nanumeans, including two leading warriors (toa). Aspects of the conversion process are discussed in Powell (1871, 1878), Davies (1873), Munro (1982), Kofe (1983) and Isako (1983).
8. When ancestral skulls and other objects used in religious worship were disposed of in neighboring Nanumaga, they were buried in the community's public square. The Samoan pastor there

[broke] down the altars in the temples, remove[d] the skulls and stone idols, and also the clubs and spears of the gods... He handled carefully the skulls as he took them from their

8. (con't) places, and respectfully covered them with pieces of Samoan native cloth...[Two days later] they proceeded with the burial of the skulls and other sacred relics from the temples and family skull houses. Some of the new converts helped Ioane, and in that grave of heathenism dug in the village malae or place of public meeting they laid 134 skulls, 1 wooden idol, 2 stone idols, 14 shell trumpets used in calling assemblies, and a lot of clubs and spears used only by order of the gods (George Turner 1876).

In Nanumea, according to informants today, some ancestral skulls were buried quietly beneath the houses of their owners, rather than disposed of publicly.

9. My discussion of this incident of the bones of Tefolaha draws on a wide variety of material: letters received from Nanumeans at the time, records kept in family ledger books, taped discussions with elders and others about it, and numerous other conversations with people who took part in the digging or listened to ahiga discussion and debate during this incident. Nevertheless, my account here presents my own view of these events and my own assessment of its importance.
10. I have presented Nanumean comments about Samoan attitudes at face value here, since it has not been possible to verify them or seek Samoan testimony about any of these events. It seems likely that Samoan perspectives would differ from those of Nanumeans.
11. In 1974, Sosemea commented on Tefolaha's lands after telling me the story of Nanumea's founding (cf. Appendix I for the narrative he told):

Remember [that Tefolaha] was a warrior. On his travels there [in Samoa] he ruled, he could take lands. That was in accord with ancient custom. If you are strong, if you are tough, then you go fight with [so and so]. You fight and fight, and if he loses to you, you take those lands as yours. It was like that on Tefolaha's travels. He fought with the Samoans. He just took [those] lands there in Samoa. And so to this day there are lands of Tefolaha in Samoa. They are cared for by the government, right down to this day...If only our people had been smarter in the past, and had gone to claim them from Samoa. [Pastor] Alesana, father of the Alesana here who recently went to Samoa, told us we ought to go claim Tefolaha's lands. But the thing is it would be difficult nowadays. Today there is an [independent] government in Samoa. So I don't know if the British government still has the power to try to get back the land of Tefolaha on behalf of the people of Nanumea. We don't know, but probably it could not, since the government of Samoa is now independent.