

Review

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INGJERD HOËM, EVEN HOVDHAUGEN, & ARNFINN MURUVIK VONEN, *Kupu mai te Tūtolu: Tokelau oral literature*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press / The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1992. Pp. iii + 196 (with 6 color plates).

We can learn a good deal about Tokelau culture and verbal performance from this collection of essays and text exegeses, put together by three Norwegian scholars who are part of an active group of students of Polynesian languages and traditions at the University of Oslo. The same authors were also involved in *A handbook of the Tokelau language* (Hovdhaugen et al. 1989) and in a grammar of Tokelauan for Tokelau grammar schools (*Ko te kalama Tokelau muamua*). Hovdhaugen has collected and annotated Samoan tales about genealogies and place names (Hovdhaugen 1987); and he is the co-author, with Ulrike Mosel, of an impressive and much needed reference grammar of Samoan (Mosel & Hovdhaugen 1992).

The present volume is centered on a number of texts collected by the authors in Tokelau over a period of several years; it contains five chapters on a variety of themes, including songs, dances, and formal speeches (Hoëm), stories about weaving and fishing (Hovdhaugen), and a traditional tale (Vonen). During and after their fieldwork, the three researchers divided up the work along disciplinary lines: the linguists Hovdhaugen and Vonen concentrated on the grammatical and structural aspects of the recorded texts, and the social anthropologist Hoëm on the “semantic and communicative aspects” (3). Such a division of labor is reflected in the varying ecological validity of the material analyzed. The songs and formal speeches studied by Hoëm in Chaps. 1–2 were produced spontaneously, i.e. during occasions generated by the participants themselves, without instigation by the researchers; but the “women’s narratives,” “the fishing stories,” and “the tale of Alo,” analyzed by Hovdhaugen and Vonen in the other chapters, were produced in response to their explicit requests for “stories.” However, despite my theoretical bias against the elicitation of narratives – which produces hybrid, if not (in some cases) invented genres – I enjoyed the stories presented in the book. They are remarkable performances by Tokelau speakers who manage to provide outsiders with information about their culture, perhaps not only in an attempt to momentarily placate their foreign guests’ insatiable appetite for “connected texts,” but also as part of a more general effort to validate their own version of tradition through the printed version of their stories. That the “invention of tradition” is a constant concern in Tokelau, as in other contemporary Polynesian societies (Hanson 1989, Howard & Borofsky 1989), is clearly documented in Hoëm’s chapters, where tradition and authenticity are two central themes of the performances she analyzes.

In the second half of the 19th century, Christian missionaries brought about many changes in Tokelau culture, including a strong linguistic influ-

ence of the Samoan language which was accomplished through literacy. Given the similarity between the two languages and the small size of the Tokelau population, the Protestant (London Missionary Society) missionaries, who came from Samoa, decided to adopt the Samoan translation of the Bible (the Roman Catholic missionaries used Latin, but only in restricted oral contexts). According to Huntsman 1980 (cited by Hoëm 1990:60), Samoan came in time to be associated with communication on “matters of importance” such as religion and education, and Tokelauan became restricted to informal usage. Despite the feeling of some Tokelauan speakers that their native language is being forgotten, the texts collected in this volume show that the Tokelau language is alive and that its speakers are very active in trying to ensure its survival. As Hoëm tells us in her Introduction to the volume (1), this collection is “one of the several products of eight years to date of cooperation between the people of Tokelau, the Office for Tokelau Affairs, the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, and the University of Oslo, Norway.” This collaboration is intended to help define the language of Tokelau as an essential part of the ethnic identity of the people of the three atolls.

Despite the absence of the sharp status and rank distinctions that characterize its Polynesian neighbors (Samoa and Tonga in particular), Tokelau shares with other, more stratified Polynesian societies a competitive ethos which is manifested at different societal levels: between atolls, villages, sides of each village, and sides of the extended family. However, being selfish and wanting to be seen as better than others are among the worst things one can attribute to a person in Tokelau; hence competitiveness must be expressed under limited and publicly controlled contexts. A number of these contexts are analyzed by Hoëm in Chap. 1, “Songs and cultural identity.” She shows how, in the *fātele* ‘songs’, apparently harmless images can be read by the audience as alluding to “bonds of loyalty to a specific atoll and touch[ing] on the genealogical, and hence political, relations between the islands” (15). Songs can express sentiments that could not be otherwise expressed in public. The *fātele* is performed by men and women in dancing teams (all men or all women), alternating between playing performers or audience. “Those who perform challenge the audience, and when they have finished, it is the ‘audience’s’ turn to answer the challenge” (21). In these public performances, “Values are asserted and made the object of negotiations through the medium of song texts, which are concerned with wider cultural themes and principles, such as decency, sharing, equality and cleanliness” (25). In the *fiafia* or public feasts where songs are performed, participants also engage in skits and joking activities that are used to criticize inappropriate behavior; these allow for a type of confrontation that would be considered inappropriate in other contexts. On other occasions, ethnic identity is negotiated by celebrating those features that are considered emblematic of a “true Tokelauan” and by

mocking those behaviors that make someone *fia palagi* “wanting to be a ‘Westerner’” (33).

The issue of what constitutes a *Tokelau moni* ‘true Tokelauan’ is also one of the themes of Chap. 2, “Lāuga: Tokelau speeches,” in which Hoëm analyzes three formal speeches performed by youth groups from the three atolls. The central themes of the speeches are “knowledge” and “tradition.” In relying on a set of esoteric phrases and meanings that constitute the basic elements of traditional oral literature, the different parties seem to be challenging each other by indirectly asking, “How much of this knowledge do you really possess?” (37). In her discussion, Hoëm proposes a continuum of formality (from the instrumental to the entertainment pole) which includes spells, curses, songs, speeches, historic tales/myths, and folk tales. After presenting the texts of the three speeches, Hoëm undertakes a structural analysis of their various parts, and compares them with the work of Tu’i 1987 on Samoan *lāuga*.

Chap. 3, “The work of Tokelau women,” by Hovdhaugen, is mostly the text of a narrative by a Tokelau woman about women’s work, which the author uses to isolate a few terms for weaving that had not been discovered by other researchers. The chapter ends with six color plates of different types of hand-woven mats. Chap. 4, “Fishing stories – Tala tau i lunga o te moana,” also by Hovdhaugen, contains four stories about fishing, with comments on their common structure. Hovdhaugen identifies what he calls a “realistic tone” in the stories, but he also notes that the narrator is never the hero, and in fact is “often described as having made more mistakes and caught fewer fish than other members of the crew” (74). This feature of the narrative is related to the negative attitude, in Tokelau (as elsewhere in Polynesia), toward the attitude called *fia maualuga*, which Hovdhaugen translates as ‘wanting to be proud’; I would render it, perhaps with a Samoan bias, as ‘feeling better than or above others’. Syntactically, the utterances in the narratives tend to consist of a verbal phrase (a verbal stem sometimes accompanied by tense/aspect/mood markers and various deictic particles) or a verb plus a prepositional phrase. Hovdhaugen defines this type of structure as typical of the Tokelau oral style (see Duranti & Ochs 1990 and Ochs 1988 for similar findings in Samoan discourse).

Chap. 5, “A Tokelau folktale: The tale of Alo,” by Vonen, is perhaps the most ambitious text analysis in the book. After 44 pages of text and 290 footnotes, Vonen compares the version given to him by Uele Hamu, alias Fatia (in Fakaofu in 1986) with several other versions of the same story recorded by other researchers in Tokelau and in Samoa. Fatia’s version includes ten *tagi* ‘chants’ which are transcribed musically in an appendix.

This volume covers a vast range of verbal performances that help us better understand how the people of Tokelau are transmitting and reinventing their own culture against the threat of economic and ideological control

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exerted by more powerful nations. The book would have benefited from some editorial assistance, and from a concluding chapter that would better integrate the different themes of the volume; however, the three authors must be commended for their care in representing and framing the texts in ways that can be of use to all of those, in Tokelau and elsewhere, who are interested in Polynesian oral tradition, identity, and performance.

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