

## THE COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ROOTS OF ETHNONATIONALISM IN TUVALU

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A sense of grievance is not the only ground in which ethnonationalism can flourish but it is certainly one of its more effective fertilisers. In assessing the role that grievances have played in the political journey of Tuvalu, this paper traces a changing set of narratives. It starts with a story of benign neglect under British rule that turns sour during the stresses of separation from the colonial matrix. It then recounts a subsequent struggle for economic independence driven by a sense of injustice and couched in terms of reparation. Most recently, it has been recast as a fight for environmental survival against the forces of international indifference. Ironically, if the colonial narrative over-emphasised harmony, the latest one portrays Tuvalu as a global icon of aggrieved modern micro-statehood.

The protagonists have changed along with the narratives: first, the colonial administration and its local representatives; then, the post-independence government involved in negotiations with a small group of other state actors, most of which had an earlier colonial connection to Tuvalu; and lastly, that same government embroiled with multinational agencies like the United Nations, international conferences, regional organisations and NGOs. Grievance, it seems, needs a receptive audience to flourish, both among those who feel aggrieved and those who acknowledge a portion of responsibility for the reasons why.

Tuvalu, the former Ellice Islands, first came under formal British administration as a constituent part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Protectorate in 1892, an imposition of colonial rule subsequently revamped in the form of a colony (the GEIC) in 1916 (Macdonald 1982: 114). After more than 80 years of relatively amicable co-existence, the mainly Polynesian Ellice Islands separated from the mainly Micronesian Gilbert Islands (now Kiribati) in 1975, and gained independence from Britain in 1978.

At first glance, there is little to contradict a widespread perception that the Ellice Islands did not suffer, and perhaps even benefited more than their Micronesian compatriots, from the eight decades of colonialism. There is some historical support for such a view. The Ellice Islanders were often favourably contrasted to the Gilbertese in colonial discourse (Goldsmith 1989: 72-78). As Arthur Mahaffey wrote following his administrative visit

during the era of the Protectorate, “the manner of the gentler Polynesian, his physical beauty and softer and more liquid language, are in pleasing contrast to the rough, loud-voiced, clamorous excitable Gilbert Islander” (1910: 44). Either as a consequence or as a rationalisation of imperial attitudes, men from the Ellice group also tended to receive favoured treatment from the administration’s British officials. For example, they were employed in disproportionate numbers in the Colony government in Tarawa, especially in the police service, partly because of the stereotype that they were more reliable and partly because of a deliberate colonial strategy to appoint Colony officials from among the Ellice minority (Isala 1983a: 24, Macdonald 1982: 84). On Banaba (Ocean Island), the source of the phosphate revenues that funded the activities of the Colony for much of its life, the British Phosphate Company (later Commission) employed Ellice Islanders as relatively skilled boatmen, in contrast to the Gilbertese, who were mostly engaged as labourers (Macdonald 1982: 11). The favoured status these examples allude to was further enhanced after the Second World War because the Ellice group suffered less disruption to education and employment during the Pacific campaigns, whereas the Gilbert Islands were occupied by the Japanese for nearly two years.

The special bond that supposedly developed between colonisers and colonised fostered a perception that Ellice Islanders were more than happy to live under the *Pax Britannica*. As a result, independent Tuvalu has conventionally been portrayed as a sleepy backwater populated by people of unquestioning loyalty to the Commonwealth, an attitude as complacent as that which they showed its predecessor, the British Empire. One major assumption of the British link is a taken-for-granted royalism: journalists, media commentators and documentary makers alike have depicted Tuvaluans as quaintly attached to the monarchy and supportive of the annual Queen’s Birthday celebrations (e.g., Horner 2004).

Gadfly writer and critic, the late Christopher Hitchens, who should have known better, once even wove Tuvaluans into a horribly mixed-up gumbo of colonial discourse recruited to the service of anti-monarchical polemic. He was not even sure if he was referring to Trobrianders, i-Kiribati or Tuvaluans (an imprecision revealing in itself)<sup>1</sup> but that did not matter for his purpose, which was to mock these generic islanders’ worship of Prince Philip.

They display his photographs, they have little Prince Philip models, they even have propitiatory ceremonies to Prince Philip. The special symbol and rite of passage in this tribe is the wearing of a very large and elaborate penis-gourd and on one occasion when the Royal Yacht *Britannia* passed within hailing distance of the Islands, the Islanders asked if Prince Philip could perhaps be

allowed to put in, that their God could come to them, don the gourd and be otherwise enshrined as the totem and juju of the tribe. It was a close run thing for the royal party on that occasion. (Hitchens 1994: 74-75)

My guess is that Hitchens' weird mishmash of an account was channelling the television pictures broadcast around the world at the time of the Royal visit to Tuvalu in late 1982, especially some famous images of Queen Elizabeth and her consort being carried ashore in large canoes on the shoulders of sturdy Tuvaluan men (Slatter 1983). As a gesture of respect it was hard to beat. The irony, though, is that while Hitchens' tone is patronisingly dismissive of the islanders' deference to royalty (because he wants to go on to show that ordinary British people are equally tradition-bound and deferential and he can best do so by comparing them to "primitives"), many Tuvaluans were and are ambivalent about their ties to the monarchy.

The views of Isakala Paeniu in the early post-independence period, though not universally shared, were characteristic of this line of thought. A former civil servant and doyen of a politically influential family on Nukulaelae, he wrote a rather critical account of the 1982 royal visit, especially "the willingness of the administration to agitate the poor to make sacrifices for the rich". "The British monarch", he went on, "is among the richest people on earth. Do we regard ourselves as responsible representatives of the people by taking from the poor to give to the already rich?" He concluded that while the Queen "should be accorded the best traditional welcome... it should be a welcome that does not disrupt national services, one that the economy can afford, and above all one that does not jeopardise long-term national objectives" (Paeniu 1983: 11; see also Nisbet 1991).

It is easy to dismiss the views of someone like Hitchens who, for all I know, never set foot in the Pacific. However, even reputable commentators have fallen into the trap of seeing the Tuvaluan experience through rosier spectacles than those focused on other instances of colonialism, like Vanuatu. The assertion by at least one Fiji-based journalist (Pareti 2005: 16) that, of all the countries in the Pacific, only Vanuatu had to fight for independence has become an article of faith needing critical scrutiny. Firstly, it ignores the ongoing control exerted by France, which was not only a reluctant decoloniser in the case of Vanuatu (administered jointly with Britain as a condominium), but which has also continued to adamantly oppose independence for its other Pacific territories and has sometimes exerted that control by military force. Paradoxically, perhaps, while Vanuatu had the added burden of enduring two parallel systems of colonial administration, the tensions between Britain and France undoubtedly created a division that the independence movement could exploit. Secondly, and equally as important, the conventional wisdom pays

insufficient attention to the fact that the road to independence was rarely as smooth in any Pacific country as it assumes.

Pareti's views were echoed by anthropologist Christine Jourdan's distinction (1995: 132) between nation-states like Vanuatu, which "have had to fight for their independence" and those like Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu "that have had their independence handed to them on a silver platter". In the latter group of countries, she argued, "nationalist sentiment [was] not present at the time of independence" (1995: 132).

No doubt, the better we know a society, the more we are all inclined to see it as special, so Jourdan's depiction of Vanuatu decolonisation as exceptionally heroic is understandable; but to say that no other Pacific country approached independence without struggle is patently untrue for Tuvalu and it conflates cases whose historical trajectories varied significantly.

In the rest of this article, I will attempt to show that, while colonialism itself may have been regarded as either neutral or relatively benign by most Ellice Islanders, when they became independent Tuvaluans they did develop a sense of *postcolonial* grievance; or, to be more precise, they developed a set of grievances that arose from the process of *decolonisation* (can one say "de-colonial grievances"?). To quote John Kelly and Martha Kaplan (2001: 432) in support of my argument: "... critical scholarship on the nation-state could focus very productively on the era of decolonization... as the horizon for many real, present departures and initiatives." Moreover, as seems to be the way of these things, many of the difficulties generated by decolonisation have gained weight and retrospective justification from selected features of the colonial situation and the ongoing revision of interpretations of events from the colonial past.

#### GRIEVANCES

As is well known, the United Kingdom began to voluntarily shed responsibility for its colonial territories in the Pacific from the 1960s onward. Apart from the administratively special case of Vanuatu, these included Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony. But discarding the GEIC proved to be unexpectedly complicated. British officials and politicians assumed that, in the transition to independence, the two component groups of islands and people would remain united as a single postcolonial nation-state. Ellice Islanders begged to differ. They were far fewer in numbers than the Gilbertese (c. 7500 to c. 55,000) and so would inevitably have a minority of representatives in any post-independence legislature (McIntyre 2012: 140). In addition, they were predominantly Polynesian in language and culture, as distinct from their Micronesian neighbours. Each side felt that the cultural differences outweighed common histories of colonialism and Christianity, and

similarities of adaptation to atoll environments. In turn, cultural differences added symbolic weight to mutual stereotyping (often of a negative cast by both sides) and heightened ethnic tensions arising from the perceptions (and realities) of differential treatment by the colonial power, as outlined above.

In short, the Ellice Islanders felt uncomfortable at the prospect of being an unpopular ethnic minority within a postcolonial state. Their stance was clearly one of defending their own (cultural) identity (Macdonald 1975a, Paeniu 1975a). Their leaders insisted on having a UN-backed referendum to judge the mood of the populace. The outcome (an 88 percent turnout, of which 94 percent supported separation) confirmed the issue. The history of this pivotal period has been well documented by a number of scholars so I will not recapitulate it in detail, referring readers instead to the cogent analyses of Barrie Macdonald (1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1982), Tito Isala (1979, 1983, 1987) and Keith and Anne Chambers (1975). One important point to note, however, is the need felt by the Ellice Islanders to symbolise the break from the colonial past with a new name for the entity they were in the process of creating: Tuvalu or, in full, Te Atu Tuvalu ('cluster of eight, eight standing together'). This was a name of some historical provenience (Kennedy 1931: 1, Roberts 1958) and, whether or not it was authentically ancient, it was *lexically*, and so by extension authentically, local.

The British Colonial Office, miffed by having its plans for a seamless transition frustrated, accepted the patent desire for Tuvaluan secession and independence but with reportedly bad grace. It refused to authorise the transfer of a "due proportion" of Colony funds and infrastructure to the new state, except for one of the inter-island vessels, the *Nivaga*. What constituted a due proportion was, of course, open to debate. David McIntyre's re-reading of the archives led him to state that the Ellice demands were "absurdly ambitious" (2012: 142). Whether they were serious or simply exaggerated for bargaining purposes is unclear. McIntyre also reported that Sir Leslie Monson, the commissioner sent by the British government to assess the situation, conceded Ellice Islanders had contributed to the phosphate workings on Banaba. By implication, to deny them any of the money accumulated in the Colony's Revenue Equalisation Reserve was likely to foster a sense of grievance, even if Britain promised additional development assistance in lieu (McIntyre 2012: 142-43).

I will return to these matters later. Before I do so, however, let me put this discussion on a personal footing. I first arrived in Funafuti, Tuvalu's capital, in December 1978, some two months after the official ceremonies marking Independence. Over the next few weeks, at various social gatherings in the lead-up to Christmas, I was confronted by a number of Tuvaluans who either *assumed* I was British (in which case they proceeded to question my

principles and parentage) or *asked* if I were British (probably with a view to launching into a tirade if I answered yes). Naturally, it was of great comfort to identify myself as a New Zealander, i.e., someone with an entirely blameless record in the history of colonialism. (I also wisely and conveniently omitted to mention I had been born in England.) The fact that New Zealand was as guilty as Britain of exploiting Tuvaluan labour for phosphate mining was irrelevant in local perceptions, at least from my experience.

Contrary to Jourdan's view, as quoted earlier, there was a very palpable sense of nationalism around the place. This included open pride in the new name of the country, highlighted for instance in a church youth dance group performance that I attended, in which one dance involved six young women holding cards on which the individual letters of the name TUVALU were carried and woven into the performance (see front cover). The choreography had been devised for presentation in overseas festivals and I was told it had won an award in Fiji, so was very much a part of how Tuvaluans presented themselves to the outside world.

Later, on my first trip to some of the outer islands on the *Nivaga* (as noted above, the sole ship bequeathed to Tuvalu at separation from the Gilberts), I was struck by the nonchalance with which the nation's name was rewritten as "Tu-8" on luggage and containers. Not only was the name accepted, it seemed people were even comfortable playing with it. Implicitly, there was also a sense of superiority at having asserted this point of difference from the Gilbertese who, instead of claiming the equivalent name for themselves of *Tungaru* (as was widely expected by many observers, e.g., Paeniu 1975b), went with the less radical option of Kiribati, a transliteration of the colonial name of Gilberts.

#### RELIGION AND ETHNONATIONALISM

One aspect of Tuvaluan life that enhanced the budding sense of ethnonationalism was religion or more precisely the hegemonic version of Protestant Christianity that had held sway over the archipelago since the 1860s (Goldsmith 1989). The independence constitution mandated a separation of church and state but for all practical purposes the Ekalesia Tuvalu/Tuvalu Church was the established religion.<sup>2</sup> Nominally at least, it commanded the loyalty of about 95 percent of the population and was unchallenged on some of the outer islands. On Funafuti, other faiths had adherents (Seventh Day Adventists, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, and even a few Roman Catholics) but even there, the most urban and diverse community that Tuvalu had to offer, they were a tiny minority. On the outer islands, they had either gained no foothold or comprised even smaller groups of worshippers than in the capital.

It is significant that the process of gaining religious independence had preceded political independence by a couple of decades. Up until 1958, the

Ellice Church had been ruled under the aegis of the London Missionary Society (LMS, later to become the Council for World Mission), which had based its regional operations in (Western) Samoa. For most of their Christian history, Ellice Islanders had been missionised by a succession of mainly Samoan pastors, and inspection visits by British missionaries tended to originate from Samoa. Along with Tokelau and the Gilbert Islands, the Ellice Islands were labelled the Northwest Outstations of the Samoan Mission and, even when that quaint term was phased out, the Ellice Islands remained part of the Samoan Church's congregational system. Scriptures and a good deal of liturgy were also couched in the Samoan language and many of the local churchmen received training at Mālua, the main LMS College in Western Samoa.

In 1958, however, the Ellice Church split from its Samoan parent body and became self-governing (Kofe 1976). Even so, people continued to use the Samoan Bible. Publication of a Tuvaluan-language New Testament was spurred on by, and coincided with, Tuvalu Independence. I purchased a copy soon after my arrival. It had been translated by my friend and mentor, the Tuvalu Church General Secretary Alovaka Maui (Goldsmith 1996), and it proudly bore the new national crest on its cover.

As I have argued elsewhere (Goldsmith 1989), religion, with its emphasis on consensus and even uniformity, was undoubtedly one of the factors fostering a sense of unity in the new nation. I have already mentioned the incorporation of such national symbols as the new name in a church youth group dance. In a trope that created oneness from constituent parts, the dancers gave that sense of embodied unity a truly performative dimension.

I do not wish to leave the impression that such religious unity arose without opposition. A myriad of social and cultural pressures made non-conformity difficult, but not impossible, especially on Funafuti. On some of the outer islands of Tuvalu, however, breaking away from the Tuvalu Church was and is decidedly problematic. Even with constitutional liberties of worship, which means in practice hard-won tolerance for a few minority religious beliefs, there have been strong controls over proselytising, which is seen as a threat to the fragile balance of village order. As recently as 2003, a legal judgment brought about by events on one of the northern islands, Nanumaga, reinforced the power of village authorities to keep out proponents of what are deemed to be new and destabilising faiths (Farran 2009: 214-15, New Zealand Law Commission [NZLC] 2006: 21, Olowu 2005).

Nevertheless, though some members of Tuvaluan society kick against the religious traces, and may even do so on the basis of perceived grievances against the dominant church's actions and privilege, such "free-thinking" does not generally translate into a sense that Christianity (and the other "world religions" that have gained a toehold from time to time) are invalid. Ivan

Brady's view (1975) that, for Tuvaluans, Christianity became internal to society while the colonial administration remained ineluctably an external force, is still a useful way to conceive of religiosity in this particular microstate.

#### ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO NATIONHOOD

Tuvalu, then, seemed to me in 1978 a place where a distinct and positive style of nationalist sentiment was evident. But it also faced enormous economic problems. In addition to their participation in a subsistence sector based on horticulture and fishing, some Tuvaluans cut copra for export—but because of changing world market conditions that was rapidly coming to an end as a reliable source of external revenue. Others were engaged in wage labour in the phosphate mining industries of Banaba and Nauru, and increasing numbers were being hired as seamen on merchant shipping lines after undergoing training at a marine school on Amatuku, one of the islets of Funafuti. These two forms of waged employment were the main sources of remittance income for the Tuvaluan economy at that time. Unlike residents of some of the other Pacific microstates, Tuvaluans had little or no access to metropolitan countries such as New Zealand, either through automatic right of entry (as do the Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau) or through quota systems of migration (as does Samoa). To put it another way, Tuvaluans lacked the kind of migratory opportunities that sometimes derive from prior colonial connection. Britain, as the former colonial power, did not put out the welcome mat to citizens of its former colonial possessions in the Pacific, thus denying Tuvaluans, i-Kiribati and Solomon Islanders the demographic safety valve enjoyed by some other former colonial possessions.

As a newly independent nation, Tuvalu had a growing bureaucracy as well as public health and education systems to support. Most waged employment in the country derived from government services. A few of these services, such as the office promoting the sale of national stamps and first-day covers into the international philatelic market, brought in revenue, but it was not large and, like copra, it was soon to wane. To make ends meet, Tuvalu needed a great deal of financial assistance from abroad, as its officials and politicians freely admitted (Paeniu 1975a). Britain provided some aid but, as already mentioned, was not perceived as generous and certainly not generous enough to warrant its very tight rein over the national budget.

#### THE TUVALU TRUST FUND

A creative solution was eventually found to many of the problems just outlined; the Tuvalu Trust Fund (TTF) was set up in June 1987 after lengthy negotiations. The agreement underpinning it was reached only

after a favourable Australian Development Assistance Bureau-sponsored appraisal by E.K. Fisk and C.S. Mellor (1986) and an earlier United Nations Development Programme proposal (UNDP 1986), which seems to have been a trial run for the Fisk/Mellor document.

The initial amount of the principal was about 26.4 million Australian dollars, with the main contributors being the United Kingdom (A\$8.5m), Australia (A\$8.0m) and New Zealand (A\$8.3m). Tuvalu itself provided A\$1.6 million. Japan donated A\$700,000 soon after and South Korea A\$30,000 a little later, bringing the total up to about A\$27.1 million (Hoadley 1992: 118, Ministry of External Relations and Trade [MERT] 1990: [p. 12], Tuvalu Government 1988: 23). South Korea's contribution was less derisory than might appear, being specifically designated for the purchase of vehicles (Wiseman 1992). Whether or not it constituted part of the actual principal is therefore unclear despite this donation's routine inclusion in the total.

Tuvalu's share came from some reserves it had built up from development assistance and investments (Fisk and Mellor 1986: 18). Paradoxically, despite its poverty of resources, Tuvalu's financial reserves since independence have generally been healthy. On balance, it has been a net lender to the world both through its current account surplus and accumulated savings in National Bank of Tuvalu deposits (Tuvalu Government 1988: 15 and elsewhere). By the time the TTF was established in 1987, the Bank had 6945 separate accounts (from a population then of under 9000) worth a total of A\$7.2 million (Tuvalu Government 1988: 33, Table 1.17). By 1990, savings and term deposits totalled A\$11.3 million (MERT 1991: 18).

The portrait of the TTF sketched so far on the basis of official and public sources may convey the impression that it developed quickly and straightforwardly. In fact, the idea of a trust fund germinated earlier and its emergence was more troubled than the official accounts imply. A more nuanced historical account may help to explain the Tuvaluan eagerness to bring about such an arrangement as well as some of the safeguards built into it by the donor countries.

Fisk and Mellors (1986: 53-56) have provided a useful but restricted interpretation of the course of events. They dated the inception of the fund from 1980, when an Australian mission to Tuvalu expressed the first real donor nation support for the proposal. Members of the mission apparently recommended alternative budget support strategies such as a trust fund.

Thus emboldened, the Tuvalu Government approached the British Government in 1982 for a "once-and-for-all" payment. At the same time it asked Australia and New Zealand for substantial one-off assistance to help solve the government's long-term budgetary shortfalls. These proposals were rejected at that time.

By 1984, however, the Tuvalu Government had refined a proposal for a Reserve Fund, to which the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand might contribute. Discussions began with the Australian High Commission in Suva in late 1984 and early 1985, leading to a detailed submission for a trust fund in October 1985. Australia agreed to examine the proposal in more detail. Tuvalu's chief negotiator at that time, Henry Naisali, also travelled to Wellington to meet the then Prime Minister of New Zealand, David Lange, who said he would support the concept in principle. He also offered to set aside an immediate sum of NZ\$500,000 unilaterally and to throw in more if the other major players joined the scheme. Apparently, Lange's sympathies for Tuvalu's situation had been aroused by his visit there for the South Pacific Forum meeting in 1984.

The Australian government, too, was sympathetic but imposed two conditions: it wanted another chance to look at the proposal and it insisted on British involvement (Wiseman 1992). The United Kingdom then reconsidered its position. Meanwhile, American and Japanese contacts were reluctant to commit themselves but did not refuse outright. Representatives of the European Community stated that they found the concept difficult to support. The UN was willing to provide technical assistance but not money. The UN Development Programme office in Suva did later provide technical advice in the form of the scoping study referred to earlier (UNDP 1986). All of these developments culminated in the 1987 agreement.

#### SECESSION AND THE PHOSPHATE RESERVE FUNDS

Tuvaluan sources trace the origins of the TTF further back in time than those cited above. Tito Isala, a former Tuvaluan civil servant and witness to many of the events leading up to Independence, has claimed the concept was discussed as early as the London separation conference in March 1975 (Isala 1988: 83, pers. comm. 1992). The proposal fell on deaf ears. When Tuvalu decided to proceed to secession and then independence, very great pressure was exerted by Britain to make that prospect as unappetising as possible.

The British government... made it a condition that Tuvalu should not benefit from any assets, whether fixed, movable, or in cash, of the GEIC if on separation these were outside the Ellice Islands. The only exception was one ship which should be given to Tuvalu to see it, as it were, on its way. Tuvalu was also not to benefit from any phosphate royalties. (Isala 1988: 16-17, in-text citations omitted; for further details see Macdonald 1982: 255)

There was a contradiction in the British stance. As Isala (1988: 17) has pointed out, the British negotiators were quick to acquiesce in the notion of

a localised civil service. Not only would this arrangement be cheaper, but there was confidence in the skills displayed by the many Tuvaluans who had performed well for several decades in the GEIC Administration. Apparently, however, this confidence did not extend to control over financial operations, partly because of paternalist concerns for probity and partly because of a desire to retain the ultimate power that such control brings.

Whatever the British motivations, Tuvalu was deprived of the financial self-reliance that access to a share of the accumulated phosphate revenues might have brought. A substantial amount had built up in the GEIC's Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund (RERF) from income generated by several decades of mining on Banaba (Fairbairn 1992: 5, Siwatibau 1991: 29). That fund had been established in 1956 with the aim of maintaining and stabilising the recurrent budget, especially after phosphate deposits were eventually exhausted. British pique at Tuvaluan secessionism, however, meant that the RERF was retained by Kiribati after separation in 1975, a decision further confirmed when that country became independent in 1979.

The RERF, not surprisingly, bears a number of structural similarities to the TTF. Though supervised by a wholly local committee, it has been managed on a day-to-day basis by overseas functionaries. Having been set up much earlier, it is correspondingly larger, being valued at A\$266 million in September 1991 and over A\$500 million in 2003, though it is generally somewhat smaller on a per capita basis than the TTF (Sugden 2005: 150). It has apparently been milked even more cautiously for recurrent expenditures than the TTF. The investment strategy has also been more conservative (emphasising bonds and bank deposits as opposed to equities) though there are signs that this may have changed, perhaps under the stimulus of the neighbouring trust fund's early performance.

The existence and some aspects of the RERF no doubt made it a model for the TTF, which had an early working title of "reserve fund" (Connell 1988: 77, Isala 1988: 82-83). A more important legacy of the reserve fund concept, though, was resentment at British unwillingness to allocate any of the RERF money to Tuvalu. This bitterness throws light on certain subsequent events.

At the 1975 separation conference, the Ellice Islands delegation proposed that the British should set up a fund

... with 'the same amount which the Ellice should but will not be getting from the [GEIC] reserve fund'. The British delegation refused to support this proposal, as did Wellington and Canberra when the Chief Minister broached the subject with them immediately after separation. (Isala 1988: 83; in-text citations omitted)

Barrie Macdonald's history of the Colony largely concurs with this interpretation (1982: 266-67). There is no doubt that Britain's intransigence hardened Tuvaluan resolve to separate from Kiribati and gain independence. The UK delegates probably recognised at one level that their stance was unfair but they were stuck in a negotiating position that had backfired. The New Zealand government later openly pointed to the earlier denial of phosphate revenues as a factor in the establishment of the TTF. The Lange Government said in 1985 that it was interested in allocation of monies from the British Phosphate Commission (BPC) towards such a fund (Fisk and Mellor 1986: 55).

Tuvalu had a good case to receive a pro rata proportion of the GEIC reserves. For a start, several thousand person-years of Tuvaluan labour had gone into the phosphate works at Banaba (and at Nauru, though none of those profits were siphoned off into the RERF). While exact figures for the whole period in question have not been compiled, we do know that hundreds of contract workers were recruited to work at Banaba from the rest of the Colony between 1901 and 1979 (Munro 1990). It was, in part, their labour power which created the surplus value that made profits for the BPC.

Indeed, the authorised history of the BPC maintains that as early as 1965 the Commissioners had "accepted an obligation to provide long-term investment funds for Nauru and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony" (Williams and Macdonald 1985: 494). Moreover, when mining ceased at Banaba in 1979, "the Commissioners drew on their surpluses to make development grants to the Republic of Kiribati and to Tuvalu. Tuvalu was given assistance with furnishing its legislature, and a building to house a newly-established development agency" (p. 523).

Recall another reason why Tuvaluans had cause to feel aggrieved at not receiving a share of the GEIC reserve fund. Ellice Islanders had been employed in comparatively large numbers in the pre-secession Colony administration and at lower wage rates than would have been paid to expatriate staff. In conjunction with the phosphate royalties from Banaba, this exploitation (or super-exploitation) of their labour power allowed the British government to run the GEIC as a self-supporting and even profit-making enterprise. The fact that some Tuvaluans and i-Kiribati were involved in the exploitation of the Banabans' resources and destruction of their environment, as well as in the colonial subjugation of their fellows, does not excuse Britain's later actions (Teaiwa 2005).

In my view, it is no coincidence that when the TTF was finally set up, the major donors were Britain, New Zealand and Australia, the three member countries of the BPC. That these were the very countries whose farmers reaped the rewards in terms of cheap superphosphate and pastoral profits for many decades seems to have finally carried some weight.

## THE SIDNEY GROSS AFFAIR

I have already referred to many Tuvaluans' growing frustration with the British government and with the constraints it was placing on financial decision-making. No one felt this more keenly than the man entrusted with taking Tuvalu through the separation process—Toaripi Lauti, Chief Minister during the transition from 1975 to 1978 and first post-independence Prime Minister from 1978 to 1981 (Isala 1983a, 1988).

Unfortunately, his attempt at a solution led ultimately to his political downfall as the result of an episode commonly known as the “Sidney Gross Affair” (Isala 1983b: 175-76, 1988: 79, 83; Sapoga 1983: 180-81; Teiwaki 1989: 155-56). This involved the Prime Minister taking up an offer by Gross, a Californian businessman, to invest all of Tuvalu’s available funds (some A\$550,000) in real estate returning 15 percent interest to the government (Connell 1980: 30). Whether or not this transaction would have led to the Gross Domestic Product becoming Gross Private Property will never be known. In the event, Britain and other major aid donors objected strongly, intervened, and the deal fell through. Fortunately, the main sum was returned, though reportedly without the promised interest (Lauti 1979, 1980; PIM 1979a, 1979b, 1980a, 1980b; Tuvalu Government 1988: 19).

For me, there are clear symbolic links between this failed investment deal, the Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund (RERF), and what was to eventually become the Tuvalu Trust Fund (TTF). In essence, a principal sum was to be invested and Tuvalu was to reap rewards from the interest. There were important differences, of course: the Gross investment was much smaller, it was based solely on Tuvalu’s contribution, and the legal framework was much less watertight. But, in many respects, the idea was similar, a fact which may have been embarrassing for the metropolitan powers to acknowledge when negotiations on the trust fund began.

Toaripi Lauti’s joint venture scheme earned him strong disapproval and, while he retained his seat in Parliament, it cost him the Prime Ministership. But the episode also dramatised the degree of frustration with Britain’s continued day-to-day financial control, and the unfairness of its previous negotiating position. The Sidney Gross affair may well have cleared a path for the fund to be established, if only by making it look feasible by comparison.

After the 1981 election, the new government under Dr. Tomasi Puapua brought former civil servant Henry Naisali to Cabinet as Minister of Finance and Commerce. Naisali’s overseas negotiating skills have been widely acknowledged as influential in sealing the fund agreement (Attorney General’s Office 1987, Wiseman 1992). Tito Isala has also offered some insightful comments about the new Cabinet’s ability to shift the balance of power between ministers and civil servants in favour of the former (Isala 1988: 81-

84). Whichever political grouping deserves most of the credit, support for the negotiations was widespread among political leaders of all stripes. When agreement on the TTF was reached in 1987, the news was received jubilantly by all Members in the Tuvalu Parliament (Wiseman 1992).

By then, Henry Naisali had relinquished his seat to take up the position of South Pacific Forum Secretary General, but the Puapua government retained power until the 1989 elections. The final stages of negotiations were handled by the Hon. Kitiseni Lopati, the Minister of Finance and Commerce who replaced Naisali (Isala 1988: 82). Britain's qualms about what might happen after a political transition were not justified and all the safeguards seemed to be working (Wiseman 1992).

Several factors, then, contributed to the establishment of the TTF: the parlous state of the country's finances, New Zealand and Australian willingness to consider new solutions, increasing recognition that Tuvalu had been unfairly treated at secession, and Tuvaluan leaders' own persistence and desperation. There is ample justification for Kitiseni Lopati's assertion that the fund was "the country's single greatest achievement since Independence" (Tuvalu Government 1988: 8). Virtually all Tuvaluan politicians saw it as an act of assertion, not as an acceptance of dependency.<sup>3</sup>

#### TUVALU'S NEW ROLE AS ECOLOGICAL SYMBOL

As the issues surrounding the separation and independence of Tuvalu achieved their various resolutions, however, another set of grievances have come to dominate the country's sense of nationhood and its self-image in the world. Increasingly, Tuvalu has attained the status of an internationally recognised symbol of the devastating consequences of global warming produced by the emission of greenhouse gases in the industrial economies of the world (both developed and developing). The script of this particular disaster movie has Tuvalu, along with other low island/atoll states, overwhelmed by rising sea levels.<sup>4</sup> The message has been conveyed by several film and television documentaries (e.g., Horner 2004, Pollock 2005; see also the review article by Chambers and Chambers 2007), at least one syndicated American radio programme and numerous print stories (Allen 2004; Bennetts and Wheeler 2001; Braasch 2005; Connell 1999, 2003; EPSB 2000, 2001-2, 2004; Field 2005; Gregory 2003, 2005; Knox 2002; Levine 2002; Lynas 2005; Simms 2001, 2002; Warne 2004).

Incidentally, the self-referentiality of many of the print and visual sources on this topic is truly astonishing. Why did the makers of the recent documentary "Time and Tide" coin the same title for their work as the publishers of the Lonely Planet picture book, apparently without noticing their signal unoriginality? Even more starkly, the incessantly reinvented phrase "sinking

feeling” (when the problem is one of *rising* sea levels) has gone beyond cliché to hint at something ideological in the representation of Tuvalu’s plight.

This new grievance discourse of environmental abuse has been in evidence since at least the early 1990s. In the rest of this section, I will sketch some of the main features of the discourse and relate them to changes in the way that Tuvalu has conducted itself in international forums in the intervening period.

One consequence is that the narrative of ecological grievance, besides swamping the other narratives discussed so far, has lent itself to retrospective reading of colonial-era grievances as having been environmental all along. The film by Horner (2004), for example, has an interview with an elderly Toaripi Lauti (his name misspelt), former Prime Minister but by the time of filming Governor-General, in which he argues that both Britain and the US (but especially the latter) should bear responsibility and pay compensation for the “borrow pits” excavated to provide coral to surface the Second World War runway on Funafuti.

The broader problem of global warming has, for most Pacific nations, focused attention on the (in)action of two countries that have dragged their feet on recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: the United States (whose earlier impact I have just alluded to) and Australia, which, under the Liberal government of Prime Minister John Howard (ousted in 2007), dismissed scientific claims for global warming as unproven and notoriously refused to take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, on the grounds that jobs for Australians outweighed the rights of Pacific states to a continued existence (Goldsmith 2005).

Why has Tuvalu achieved such prominence in the global warming debate? In part, because of some very effective telling of its story. Ever since Bikenibeu Paeniu went to the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Rio Earth Summit, each successive Prime Minister has assumed the mantle of spokesperson for small nations victimised by the policies and actions of the industrialised world. When Lonely Planet, the well-known publisher of travel guides, decided to publicise the Tuvaluan situation with a glossy coffee table picture book (Bennetts and Wheeler 2001), they did so with the encouragement of the then Prime Minister, Ionatana Ionatana. After his untimely death, the foreword was contributed by his successor, Faimalaga Luka.

In September 2002, Luka’s successor, Saufatu Sopoaga, attended the World Development Summit in South Africa and continued the theme (Pacific Peoples Partnership 2002):

Environmental problems were highlighted, with the Tuvalu Prime Minister describing the ‘very scary experience’ faced by his people on the tiny atolls of

Tuvalu as a result of climate change and sea level rise. He, like the others who spoke, called on all parties to take immediate steps to ratify Kyoto Protocol 'as a matter of urgency'.

The Tuvalu Prime Minister also expressed disappointment that the Summit could not agree on targets for implementing renewable energy "given the direct link between energy and climate change" and despite Tuvalu's continued call for a minimum target of 15% on renewable energy by 2015. He blamed those countries that had refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol for the failure to agree on renewable energy targets. He welcomed the positive stance taken by the European Union and others on climate change and renewable energy.

Saufatu Sopoaga's successors as Prime Minister, Maatia Toafa and Apisai Ieremia have not stepped into the international limelight to the same extent. But there are no signs that the discourse itself has changed. At the Wellington "Climate Change and Governance Conference" of March 2006, Saufatu's brother Enele Sopoaga, the then head of Tuvalu's mission to the United Nations in New York, gave a polished keynote presentation in which the message remained one of sheeting responsibility home to the greenhouse gas emitters. Sopoaga has since been elected to the Parliament and may well assume leadership of the country.

\* \* \*

Grievance discourses change over time. People may have longstanding complaints that they were too polite to express except indirectly (such as Isakala Paeniu's sniping at the 1982 royal visit) or they may simply lack the means of redress that could give the grievances workable shape. Previously amicable relations may suffer reversal when expectations of support built up over generations are set aside. Apparent loyalty and cordiality can change overnight. Hence, the discourses that emerge from, and attempt to make sense of, historical events may come to have a closed, all-or-nothing, quality.

During the American occupation of the Ellice Islands in the Second World War, it is fair to say that the British colonial regime was found wanting in comparison by many locals (Koch 1978). Despite a tradition of mutual loyalty between the Crown and its colonial subjects, this disparity provided fertile ground for the eventual resentment sparked by British insensitivities in the process of decolonisation. Yet, within ten years of Independence, Britain collaborated with Australia and New Zealand to set up a trust fund that was born, I have argued, out of a perceived need to redress the inequities created at Independence. Almost from that time forward, Tuvaluan ethnonationalism entered a new phase, in which Australia and the United States have been

marked as those most responsible for Tuvalu's current state of grievance. It is, of course, impossible to predict how the story will develop next. My guess is that it will increasingly engage with the ambivalent relationship between Tuvalu and New Zealand, which is where most expatriate Tuvaluans now live and where any future large-scale resettlement is most likely to take place. How that scenario plays out will depend on how well the political leaders of both countries frame the debates over historical responsibility—and whether they do so in unison.

#### NOTES

1. In fact, Tanna in Vanuatu boasts the most ardently supported cult of Prince Philip in the Pacific. It continues to serve journalistic day-trippers as an emblem of primitive irrationality (e.g., Marks 2010a, 2010b; Squires 2007).
2. When I first went to Tuvalu, the main church was still called the Tuvalu Church or Ekalesia Tuvalu. It only later adopted the name Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu (EKT) or Tuvalu Christian Church, possibly as a way of advertising its mainstream nature in opposition to an increasing number of alternative denominations.
3. It seems only fair to acknowledge an alternative take on the reasons behind the Tuvalu Trust Fund's (TTF) establishment. The late Ron Crocombe attributed it to a *quid pro quo* of strategic denial: "Aid and concessions from Western governments to the Pacific increased dramatically when USSR (Russia in practice) offered aid in the 1970s. All donors rejected a Tuvalu Trust Fund until then Deputy Prime Minister Henry Naisali insisted on it in return for New Zealand's request to reject Russian aid" (2006: 10). While I certainly agree that a number of Pacific Island governments (most famously perhaps Western Samoa during the Prime Ministership of the leader then known as Tupuola Efi) bargained successfully for increases in aid from Australia and New Zealand by playing up the Russian threat, I am sceptical that this was a major factor in the case of the TTF. The influence of the USSR was already starting to wane by the late 1970s and was no longer credible by the mid-1980s.
4. This "disaster movie" reference is not totally facetious. When "The Day After Tomorrow", a Hollywood eco-thriller based on predictions of climate change, was released in 2004, the Tuvalu delegation at the United Nations sent out a press release describing the film's fictional scenario as scarily realistic for Tuvaluans (EPSB 2004).

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ABSTRACT

This essay traces the development of Tuvaluan ethnonationalism through a series of historical and contemporary narratives. These framing narratives proceed from a picture of benign neglect under British colonial rule to a widespread perception of unfair treatment by Britain during and after the transition to Independence. Most recently, cultivation by its leaders of the nation's image as an icon of the threat to island societies from global warming and sea level rise redirects the sense of grievance to different targets. In effect, then, rather than being forged by a conventional anti-colonial struggle, Tuvalu's national identity came more sharply into relief through decolonisation and its aftermath.

*Keywords:* Tuvalu, ethnonationalism, history, grievances, trust funds.