# LIVING A "CONVENIENT FICTION"

Anne Chambers
Keith S. Chambers
*Southern Oregon University*

Long-term fieldwork offers a unique perspective on the complex, interactive process of interpretation on which ethnography depends. Through shared experiences, the ethnographer(s) and host community collaborate in constructing reciprocal identities tailored to their respective needs and the local situation. The mutual expectations and assumptions grounding this relationship become more visible as they are defined by subsequent events and encounters over the years. Our article analyzes some significant twists and turns in our thirty-year relationship with the Tuvaluan atoll community of Nanumea. In initially defining us as "of the island," the community established us in a local category resonant with key emic values (community solidarity, equality). As time passed, this fieldwork identity was reinforced, and constrained, by local interactions and decisions. Similarly, research products and opportunities were informed by the expectations the community held regarding our identity. Using a long-term reflexive lens, this case study reveals how complex and interconnected is the process of creating an ethnographic relationship.

THE CREATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC INFORMATION is a highly complex process, as the last thirty years of anthropological analysis and debate have demonstrated. Recognition that ethnographic writings themselves are interpretations (Geertz 1973), though "fashioned" and "constructed" to be as authentic as the ethnographer can manage, has focused attention on the process of fieldwork immersion and necessitated a more subtle and reflexive description and delineation of key events, historical relationships, and social interactions. Attention has been directed to the internalized "interfering intermediaries" that inevitably "maintain outposts in [the ethnographer's]

*Pacific Studies*, Vol. 27, Nos. 3/4—Sept./Dec. 2004

mind" (Jackson 1990:32). Theoretical allegiances, personal beliefs, cultural assumptions, and prior ethnographic understandings all constrain (and inspire) the ongoing recording of ethnographic information and its analytic construction. Equally important, fieldwork is a relational process, with the host community determining aspects of ethnographic outcome and increasingly able to influence the interpretive process with feedback about written materials (Jacobs-Huey 2002). As the product of so many internal and external influences, ethnographic writing and fieldwork (like human behavior generally) are now understood to be "overdetermined, . . . reflecting multiple meanings simultaneously" (Johnson and Johnson 1990:163).

This complexity poses an analytical challenge for anthropologists interested in understanding more completely how ethnographic processes steeped in ambiguity (creative but still representative, serendipitous but realistic) produce convincing and representative portraits of the human condition (Sanjek 1990a:395–404). Disciplinary responses to this challenge have taken a variety of paths, including the development of a genre of reflexive fieldwork accounts describing personal and relational aspects of an ethnographer's experience (just a few examples drawn from three decades include Briggs 1970; Rabinow 1977; Rosaldo 1989; Behar 1993; Flinn, Marshall, and Armstrong 1998 ). In addition, ethnographic interpretation itself has been problematized, dissected, and scrutinized from conceptual, methodological, and ethical perspectives (cf. D'Andrade 1995; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Scheper-Hughes 1995). Analysis of strategies used to claim representational authority (Crapanzano 1986) complement sometimes heated debate about ultimate anthropological goals, science, advocacy, and ownership of ethnographic information (Jaarsma 2002). Assessments of many specific aspects of fieldwork practice, ranging from note taking (Sanjek 1990b) to long-term fieldwork (Foster et al. 1979b; Kemper and Royce 2002), also reveal the assumptions and broader patterns in anthropology's research engagement. Taken together, this considerable body of reflexive and critical analysis has raised disciplinary consciousness about the complexity of ethnographic research. This consciousness sets the stage for our discussion here of one particular component of fieldwork experience, namely, the development and maintenance of fieldwork identity in long-term fieldwork.

While creation of research identity is inevitable in any ethnographic work, analysis of a long-term research situation seems especially conducive to revealing the creative interplay between ethnographer and host community and the effects of a "fabricated" identity on the ethnographic products that result.[1] As Bond notes (drawing on Foster et al. 1979a:330–331 and his own experience), long-term research has predictable effects on fieldworkers' research interests, skills, and social standing:

> The researchers become known quantities in the field and are treated as social persons. They have a place in the past, and their work is understood. They may negotiate their own past; they are of the community and yet beyond it. Their standing within society has changed and so also has their vantage point. There is much assumed common ground, shared knowledge and experience, a situation that does not obtain for beginners in the field. (Bond 1990:281)

Reciprocating interaction over decades results in a highly complex relationship in which potential outcomes may be just as important as actual ones and in which the expectations of researcher and hosts are seldom ever fully articulated.

Both community and ethnographer benefit from having time together: time to create revised understandings of each other's assumptions, goals, and categories. A time frame that can accommodate adaptive changes is crucial to developing a fieldwork identity that is relevant and effective from both parties' points of view. Such a "successful" ethnographic identity must somehow bridge the cultural divide between insiders and outsiders, not contorting too unbearably the reality accepted by either party but facilitating a safe, productive interaction. Because identity-construction processes are as "fabricated" and "overdetermined" as any other ethnographic product, they are seldom fully subject to any one party's conscious control, perhaps especially at first, even though all involved may have goals in this regard. As the relationship unfolds, takes unexpected turns, and transforms in response to implicit cultural categories, diverse hopes and expectations, and strokes of serendipity, conscious decisions or realizations may be made periodically by any or all parties. Much that ultimately proves to be determining may not be consciously marked, of course.

The resulting identity affects, and is affected by, the fieldwork process and its products. Thus, reflexive analysis of factors involved in the construction of fieldwork identity can offer a useful lens for examining the complexity of ethnographic methodology, both generally and in specific historical, social, and political contexts. Of course, as Salzman has noted (2002), "sincere" self-analysis does have inherent limitations that require corrective assessment via disciplinary debate. Incorporation of reflective analysis and feedback from the relevant host community is equally essential.[2]

The following case study, based on our thirty-year-long research relationship with the Tuvaluan community of Nanumea,[3] shows the important role that local categories can play in setting the initial terms for ethnographic engagement. Once an appropriate local category was found and accepted by ourselves and community members, both parties were drawn to use it

as a logical basis for subsequent behaviors and decisions. This grounding in local institutions affected the overall tenor of our fieldwork relationships by subtly rebalancing the power disparity, inevitable given the colonial context framing our early fieldwork. Increasingly, as our involvement with the Nanumea community lengthened to span decades and was accorded "a place in the past," this established identity category became the reference point for further ethnographic engagement as certain key local events offered research opportunities but also confirmed expectations about "who we were supposed to be." Here we describe some of the more informative twists and turns in our "ethnographer's path" (Sanjek 1990a:398–400), focusing on the process through which we came to be associated with a locally relevant category and how this fieldwork identity became confirmed and workable over time.

One personal note is in order. In scripting this account, our analysis takes a unitary perspective. Idiosyncratic particulars have been set aside in favor of shared features, which we believe to be more significant. Even though we are two individuals, and periodically have pursued separate research agendas, our relationship with Nanumea began as a couple and has continued as such into the present. We sense that the community has largely connected us together to form a single social "person," collapsing our identities in a way that effectively complements the local categorization discussed below.[4] Having official married status (and documenting it to the community) did form a legitimizing precondition for our initial acceptance, in fact. In the first month after our arrival, many of the women who visited our house voiced covert concern that we might be just living together, a moral lapse then associated with young expatriates, especially the vague category of "hippies" that no one could clearly describe. Visitors usually noted our lack of wedding rings and listened skeptically to our description of alternative wedding symbolism. Some then asked to see a wedding picture (which we didn't have). Once we realized that serious moral concern lay behind these visits, we began showing visitors a copy of our marriage license. The pastor's wife was the last visitor to be shown this document, having specifically asked to see it. Legitimating our status as an officially married couple in this way may have accentuated our conjoined identity in community eyes. In any case, the fieldwork identity we describe here was intended, by both sides we think, to embrace us equally.

## "Of the Island"

Our story begins in June 1973. We had come to Nanumea, one atoll in the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony, as part of a research project funded by the British government to provide social, economic, and political data on which planning for the islands' imminent independence could be based. The topics

to be documented were vast, our local-language abilities nonexistent, but we had enthusiastic optimism in abundance. Everyone, administrators and local people alike, must have thought us quite young. As *paalagi* (foreigners, white people), in that British colonial era, our behavior must have seemed unusual too. We sought out local company nearly exclusively, spoke English with an unusual accent (American), dressed far more casually than most other visitors, and worked intensively to learn the language. Perhaps most distinctive—since we felt it imperative to create some measure of "informed consent" within the community for our research to balance its government sponsorship and applied orientation—was that we tried hard to explain our goals to the people we understood to be the community's designated leaders, literally from the day we arrived.

Nonetheless, the identity we initially presented to the community must have been puzzling, even contradictory, to local assumptions and categories. We clearly had government sponsorship and connections because the colony's Agriculture Department, based in the capital, Tarawa, had sent official notification to the island of our impending arrival. Our activities and demeanor, however, bore little resemblance to colonial-government officials who periodically toured outer-island communities in that era. At first this incongruity largely escaped our attention. We were so preoccupied with creating a good impression, adapting to a new lifestyle, learning Tuvaluan, making as few serious mistakes as possible, and justifying ourselves to ourselves as diligent fieldworkers that we were initially oblivious to any possibly dissonant image we might be creating. We did have a disquieting sense, though, that our project seemed barely comprehensible to local leaders despite our efforts to explain it to them.

We also knew that our ultimate goals were sharply different from those of colonial government officials, even those who were knowledgeable about local affairs and tried to further local interests. We needed to carve out a unique, anthropological niche for our relationship with the community, but there seemed little available beyond the broad idea that our work could be used to teach distant others about Nanumean life, sometime in the future. Thus we used small opportunities that presented themselves (such as going barefoot, as virtually all Nanumeans did) to distance ourselves from the two common *palagi* categories of that time—colonial and missionary. Unknown to us, however, the community also held concerns about our identity, based on categories and assumptions that were well beyond our imagination at the time. Our first inkling of these local concerns began after we had been on the island about a week. As we finished coffee one morning, a letter that we had promised to deliver fell out of the book into which it had been carefully tucked, setting in motion a train of helpful conversations, meetings, and

decisions. Within the next hour, the letter led us across the village to a large extended-family household headed by a white-haired man named Samuelu Kolo. Luckily Sunema, our research assistant, had decided to come along to show us the way there. She was a distant relative of Samuelu's, and happily stayed with us to visit and translate.

A deacon in the local church, Samuelu was one of the most respected elders on the island. He was descended from one of two chiefly lineages that had traditionally alternated in ruling the community, and he garnered respectful attention when he spoke at village meetings even though the chiefs no longer played an official role in island government. We knew nothing of this, of course, as we approached Samuelu's house that day. But his warm welcome was encouraging and we were glad when he insisted that we sit down with him inside. Within minutes, however, Samuelu began to question our assistant intently. Slowly, through Sunema's intermittent translations, we began to piece together what he was saying. People were very curious about why we had come, and many were also a little concerned about our treatment. Traditionally, Samuelu explained, the elders would have decided whether to allow our research and then would have organized a suitable reception. The Island Council, instituted by the colony government only a few years before, now ran island affairs and therefore had these responsibilities, but had not acted publicly in regard to our arrival. Samuelu expressed concern that the council's arrangements for us might not reflect well on the community.

As he talked about his concerns, we gradually realized that Samuelu was giving us explicit advice. We should ask the council president to invite the "old men" to a special meeting. If the council refused to allow this, he warned gravely, then we ourselves should call a separate meeting of the village elders. Persuasively, Samuelu insisted that we needed to explain our plans to the whole community as soon as possible since our work was "of the island," not just a concern of the government. Therefore, it involved the community as a whole, rather than simply the Island Council.[5]

Hearing this, we worried whether a struggle for authority was separating council members from the community elders. If so, might we inadvertently have become caught in the middle of a local power struggle? Inwardly concerned, we thanked Samuelu and hesitantly promised to ask the council president to convene a special islandwide meeting, specifically including the elders. If Samuelu was any example, the "old men" of Nanumea clearly were a power to be reckoned with and we hoped that we had not offended them by dealing only with the Island Council thus far.[6] The phrases Samuelu had used, "of the island" and "of the government," stayed in our minds and raised a host of questions. This dichotomy apparently separated the sphere of colony

government, even its local embodiments on Nanumea itself, from that of the local community. Were the old men still making the island's important decisions despite the formal authority of the elected council? Why had our previous conversations with British administrators never raised this issue? Somehow, we had taken the council's existence as confirmation of its actual political authority. Why had we been led so easily to this assumption? We couldn't help but wonder as well about other pragmatic issues. What would it mean to our research to be classified as "of the government"? Should we (or *could* we) try to influence our classification one way or the other? Being "of the island" sounded better to us, but what limitations might that involve? Sunema offered no opinion on these questions. Deciding whether to follow Samuelu's advice, in whole or in part, was clearly going to be up to us despite our relative ignorance about local affairs and power relations.

Fortunately, Samuelu's advice was one of the serendipitous blessings of our fieldwork. It provided clues about key local categories and prompted a definitive Nanumean reaction to our proposed research, though the dichotomy revealed to us still offered only possible identities among which the community (and perhaps vaguely ourselves) would have to choose. The council president proved agreeable to the community meeting we requested and one morning just a few days after our discussion with Samuelu, we walked down the shaded sandy road toward the village meetinghouse, accompanied by Councilor Monise and Sunema. About thirty-five older men (plus the lone woman councilor) watched us approach, waiting for our explanation of why we had come and what work we hoped to accomplish. Mats had been spread for us facing the assembled community leaders and we took our places. Keith spoke at this official gathering, slowly laying out our plans as Sunema translated, sentence by sentence. This was the same overview we had already given to Samuelu and to several Island Council members. How would the community as a whole respond to it?

The assembled group listened impassively and silently as Keith spoke. We found it impossible to guess what their thoughts were, though afterwards there were many questions. Some showed an insightful grasp of our research plans and even made suggestions about beneficial uses our research might eventually have. We felt relieved by these. Other questions utterly surprised us. These are the ones that we still mull over, wondering about the motivations and worldviews that inspired them. How did we want the community to help us with our work? Could we teach better ways to grow *pulaka,* the main root crop? Were we going to study old customs too, or just those of the present day? Had we no children? One old man said ruefully that he had waited all his life for the British government to send someone to help the community, but now he was old and blind and could not see them! When the questions

stopped, we thanked the elders and left the hall, leaving them to decide our fate in private, as Samuelu had earlier advised.

Discussing this as we walked home with Sunema, we all agreed that the meeting had seemed to go well. What we found out later confirmed this initial feeling. The community had approved our research and people were willing to help us insofar as they could. Furthermore, we were to be considered guests "of the island." Because we were *fakaalofa*, "pitiable," without connection to any particular family and thus without rights to use island land, the community as a whole would support us for the next few months.[7] Each Tuesday and Saturday, one family from each island "side" would bring us coconuts and some raw starchy food that we could cook for ourselves.[8] An official welcome feast would now be organized, to be held the following week.

What seemed likely to be a suitable, albeit still somewhat ambiguous, relationship to the community had been confirmed for us. Acknowledged to be "pitiable" because we lacked local kin and membership in an extended-family landholding group, we had been accepted as "of the island." Government sponsorship had been explicitly set aside in favor of a local affiliation, one that confirmed us as "insiders" rather than "outsiders." No one felt it necessary to explain the implications of this category more fully, and we did not pursue any clarification ourselves either. We simply assumed that we would be some sort of marginal insiders at best, and took our "of the island" categorization as a positive fieldwork beginning. Certainly we did not fully appreciate the significance of being connected to the community as a whole, rather than to any particular group or family within it.

In retrospect, the application of this category to us seems somewhat unusual. In traditional legend and the historical era alike, overseas visitors who stayed long enough to develop enduring relationships with the community typically were assimilated through marriage. Marrying-in provided outsiders with a place to live, access to resources, and a network of personal relationships; and there seemed usually to have been no scarcity of spouses. This incorporation strategy was not possible in our case, of course. Adoption was often used as well, either initially or after a person had become established through marriage.

Pastors seemed the only consistent exception to this personalized model for assimilating strangers. With these respected men and their families, the community did structure its relationship through communal support (though on a much more elaborate scale of provisioning than our own) since a pastor's spiritual leadership was viewed as an asset to the community as a whole. Clearly, the community's decision to feed us collectively was an honor, implying concern for our material well-being as well as support for

our research. But once accepted as people "of the island," we would need to fulfill the reciprocal obligations expected of community members. We had little idea what these might be, or whether they would prove onerous or inappropriate. We did feel pleased, however, to have been designated as putative "insiders," especially since the alternative seemed to undermine our ethnographic goals. Our intended fieldwork focus on the community's social, economic, and cultural life did truly seem to have an "of the island" orientation.

## Living in the Right Place

When we had first stepped ashore on Nanumea several weeks previously, the local government official (Island Executive Officer or IEO, in the parlance of that time) had come forward, introduced himself, and escorted us to a vacant house on the government station. We could live here, he said, since the radio operator (whose allocated house this was) was a local man who stayed with his family in the village. The house had been carefully prepared for our arrival. New mats were spread over the gravel floor and the local-style walls and roof both showed evidence of fresh repairs. Households of government employees such as the meteorological recorder and the IEO himself, both Tuvaluans but not Nanumeans, were our immediate neighbors. Nearby were the guesthouse where visiting administrators were housed, the radio building, and the Island Council office. As the name implied, the government station was a place intended to serve the needs of the colonial government and bounded off from the rest of the community. Employees native to the island, such as the radio operator whose empty house had been lent to us, usually lived with relatives in the village, a choice that emphasized the "island" dimension of their identities. Since the village was just a few minutes walk away, it did not occur to us at first that living on the government station might conflict with our "of the island" identity.

The British research grant supporting our work included several hundred dollars, quite a large sum in those days, allocated for the construction of a new house. It seemed wasteful not to infuse this money into the local economy, and when we made this known, general enthusiasm developed for the community to work collectively to build us a house. The money would be used to feed the workers, who would be organized into customary work groups based on the two village sides. Building the house would be a communal work project: each family would supply an assigned amount of common building materials but the larger items would be brought in from communal lands. All of the community's buildings were built this way, we were assured. When our research was completed, the island would find a use for the house and look

after it until we returned, as we asserted we hoped to do in the not-too-distant future. This proposal seemed to fit well with an "of the island" identity.

Finding a suitable location for the new house was far from easy, however. Several families offered us sites on their own lands, though others found discreet ways to remind us that communally building a house on privately owned land was incongruous. The pastor graciously offered us long-term use of his guesthouse but we demurred, thinking how difficult it would be for members of one of the island's "new religions" to visit us there and of other constraints that living in the church compound could entail. Except for the central church grounds, the meetinghouse, the school, and the playing-field areas at the village's center, there wasn't much communally owned land within village boundaries to choose from. With our local identity now defined, we realized the importance of living within the actual village boundaries rather than outside them, as some families were now opting to do.

In the end, following subtle local direction, we settled on a lagoon-shore location that was almost precisely on the midline dividing the two village sides. This area had been filled in and built up as a dock by the occupying American forces in World War II, an irony appreciated by both islanders and ourselves. Additionally, since membership in the village sides was defined by residence in the first instance, this location had the tacit advantage of separating us from automatic inclusion in either village side, groupings that in these years were in active rivalry with each other. The elementary school was next to our house site, and our closest neighbors would be the families of the headmaster and teachers, though other village houses were in sight as well. The island gained a new building on communal property, while we could establish a home base conducive to developing relationships widely across the community. Building began immediately and energetically.

In the end, however, our grant funds purchased only token amounts of the vast quantities of food needed for so many workers over the months it took to build the house that the community designed. The house developed into the local equivalent of a palace. Constructed entirely of island materials, including a pandanus-thatched roof, it was much larger and more elaborate than two people could ever need. Admittedly, its two-story design followed our "suggestion": we *had* once commented that with the school and so many curious children close by, second-story privacy would be an advantage for our work. However, we left the house's overall design and construction up to the community. Twelve miles of hand-rolled sennit cord were eventually needed to tie the house together and several palm trees were felled for timber, laboriously hand-sawn into planks, and adzed to a luxurious smoothness. We now wonder whether the villagers saw this house-building project as an opportunity to display their traditional building skills or to showcase the

community's ability to cooperate for communal well-being. Similarly, to what extent did our house's completion revive community enthusiasm for its long-deferred renovation of the pastor's house, including a second-story addition? Certainly, however, the finished house was absolutely beautiful.

Clearly, a living situation for us that confirmed our "of the island" status on several levels had been brought into being. The locale from which our research proceeded was a central area of the village with strong communal associations. Like ourselves, the dock and its adjacent coastal landfill had been added to the village by external forces, though the current use of the area for the school claimed it for the community. With our research beginning to make some local sense as we focused on traditional history and customary practices as well as the socioeconomic questions emphasized in the government project, we were probably conforming comfortably to local expectations. We began a slow census of the village, visiting by prearrangement two or three households each day, a gradual process that allowed us to meet each family individually and discuss our research again personally. The village had come to surround us and to permeate our work. With our new house only a stone's throw away from the meeting hall and playing field, the public spaces where community was symbolically enacted, we seemed to be living out our "of the island" identity relatively unproblematically.

## Maintaining "Equality"

However, we were becoming increasingly aware that the community expected us to maintain relationships across the broad spectrum of village households. From comments people made, we realized that a close watch was being kept on our activities. Spending considerable time with traditional experts and established elders made local sense, but notice was taken of where we socialized and to whom we gave small gifts of store items. Reports of where we had recently been sometimes reached back to us through gossip channels. Since "where are you going?" was the standard local greeting, walking anywhere involved us in strategic declarations. Luckily, the census continuously expanded our social networks and probably appeared to move us through the community in a holistic and predictable way. Also, as our separate research foci became better delineated, we each had a chance to interact with a wide range of people. We felt that we were connecting quite broadly with the community, not favoring any particular segment and supporting the "equality" that speakers at meetings so often emphasized as the foundation of community life.

The emic importance of also maintaining an equitable relationship with the two village sides did not occur to us at first. As the work groups of island

life, the two village sides collaborated and competed at every communal event. They marshaled resources and labor for communal projects, provided food for feasts, and invigorated traditional festivities with competition. The village sides seemed to us to bring Nanumea into existence as a community. Thus when we attended island events organized by these groupings, we saw ourselves as interacting unequivocally with the community as a whole.

Ironically, maintaining our "of the island" identity would require us to distance ourselves from either village side, a social fact it took us several months to understand. In the meantime we participated in countless community feasts, meetings, holiday celebrations and dances, as well as wedding and funeral activities sponsored by various extended family groups. At community events, we sat sometimes with one family, sometimes with another, strategically sharing ourselves around. We used no particular plan or sense of pattern though perhaps we should have. One evening during the annual Christmas–New Year celebration of Big Days, the family with whom we were sitting scolded us. Why did we sit with just one village side again and again? Everyone, they said plaintively, was wondering why we favored one side over the other in such a public way. Ignorance never offers a very strong defense, and there wasn't much we could say except to promise to be more careful in the future. And we were, joining alternate sides at events and sometimes splitting up to each join different sides when competitive spirits ran especially high.

As we came to understand local politics and community organization more fully, and gradually developed an understanding of precontact society from the recollections of elders and traditional history accounts, we began to realize that our "of the island" role was fulfilling a convenient, didactic role for the community. Our continual enactment of a relationship with the island as a whole emphasized the value of community unity, a value that was heralded in speeches at virtually every public gathering. This discourse drew its cultural meaning from the key structural tension of Nanumean society: how to balance competing obligations to family interests and community. *Loto fenua* or *loto gatahi*, community loyalty, had long been and still was thoroughly institutionalized in island life. Its importance was apparent in customs ranging from premissionary limitations on family size, to current expectations that fish would be shared with nonrelated neighbors, to the cross-cutting pattern of membership in village groups. Kinship and descent structured social life along many other essential dimensions, however, and people also strategically maintained the well-being of their extended families. When community and family loyalties did come into conflict, as they inevitably must, community responsibility seemed to be given cultural priority, typically enforced by sanctions or heavy persuasion. In this context, we offered a highly visible embodiment of community loyalty.

This was probably a significant cultural message. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of community intensification in Nanumea. The scale of communal building projects, the protracted length of the annual Big Days celebrations, and the relative consensus about local tradition and communal goals all seem remarkable in retrospect, especially given the factionalism of the last decade. Was the "of the island" identity allocated to us a product of this era of community cohesion? Was our acceptance and relatively successful enactment of this role also reinforcing *loto fenua* as an island value? We suspect that the answer is yes to both questions.

Our unconscious reinforcement of community priorities may have been especially apt because the communal celebrations and achievements that took up so much Nanumean time and energy comprised just one dimension of local life in this era. Market-economy influences, increasing pressures for individualized achievement and "development," as well as off-island economic opportunities were cumulatively driving a relentless pace of change. Community members were finding it increasingly difficult to prioritize communal responsibility at the expense of personal and family well-being. By the time Tuvalu became an independent nation in October 1978, Nanumea and other outer-island communities were poised on the edge of worldwide engagement. Even the idea of community itself was being reshaped to accommodate national political interests. By the 1990s Nanumeans living in the capital had formed a subsidiary community, evocatively named Nanu-Futi, which increasingly led decision making for Nanumea as a whole. Nonetheless, the essence of Nanumean culture and community identity was still seen as grounded primarily in the home atoll itself.

As our relationship with Nanumea matured and endured, it necessarily took account of these changes. We developed rapport and relationships with the Nanu-Futi community and with migrants to Suva and Auckland. In all these encounters, our "of the island" identity seemed to have become entrenched as the basis for our ethnographic role. Clearly we were not and could never be true Nanumeans. But community leaders, and probably Nanumeans in general, continued to find it useful to include us metaphorically in that category. Furthermore, certain markers that had earlier carried definitive symbolism became unimportant. "Our house" is still in fine shape (minus its second story) but when we return to Nanumea, the community no longer accommodates us there. The headmaster and his family continue to use it, while a spare house on the government station is refurbished and furnished for us. "Who we are" clearly requires less overt symbolic marking now. The solidification of our identity is also illustrated by two subsequent developments that generated wide community interest and concern during the 1990s.

## Coping with "Something That Happened" (Mea Tupu)

We learned about the *mea tupu* within only a few hours of our return to Tuvalu in May 1996, our third fieldwork visit. A conflict with serious sociopolitical implications had apparently taken place on Nanumea, only referred to circuitously as *mea tupu*,"something that happened." No one offered details at first, though it was clear that the issues were both complicated and contentious. We gradually learned that a dispute had occurred in 1994, developing over several weeks, with other problems arising from the original one. To everyone's chagrin, over a year later the *mea tupu* still hovered like a black cloud over community activities. A special delegation of church leaders, government officials, and members of the Nanu-Futi community had been sent to Nanumea some months earlier to mediate a solution. Though the delegation's efforts had seemed successful at the time, no long-term resolution had resulted. Nanumeans whom we talked with in 1996 were worried, and somewhat embarrassed too. The festering of an intractable dispute such as this called into question the value of *loto fenua*, casting a public slur on the community's reputation and making Nanumea the unwelcome target of national gossip.

Several leaders in the capital, the prime minister among them, suggested to us that our current visit and impending return to Nanumea might be fortuitous. It could provide just the impetus the community needed to regain a united front and resolve their problems. These suggestions surprised us, although we can now see that our history of being "of the island," backed up by years of predictable participation in virtually every village event that occurred while we were in residence, perhaps provided a logical basis for these hopes. Whether these hopes would be fulfilled or not by our return remained another issue.

Over the next weeks we pieced together the exceedingly complicated chain of events that had caused such serious social disruption. Many underlying tensions appeared to have surfaced at once, perhaps in cumulative response to rapid cultural change and the global economic pressures the community had been accommodating for decades. Religious unity around the single Congregational church, which dated from the island's initial capitulation to missionary pressures in 1872, was becoming increasingly untenable under the strain of individual claims to religious freedom, which were backed by rights specified in Tuvalu's independence constitution. Locally, the issue involved not just the right to practice a religion of personal choice, but also the right to proselytize for it publicly.

Furthermore, the authority of the traditional chieftainship, reinstituted (after a hiatus of three decades) not long before, was proving more problematic than

anticipated. Consensus about traditional political structures and governing processes had waned to the point that there was insufficient authority to resolve a political impasse. The incumbent chief had first protected the right of a "new religion" to use a traditional metaphor. This had been perceived as slighting the primacy of the majority church and its pastor's authority. The chief had subsequently made a judgment that some community women perceived as favoring one village side over the other in a fund-raising activity. Furthermore, as community dissatisfaction mounted, the chief had refused to relinquish office, even when the lineage that many people asserted had traditional authority to install a replacement asked him to do so.

The dispute also brought into the open smoldering dissension about Nanumean leadership roles in general. The "younger" men (in their forties and fifties) demanded the right to voice their opinions in meetinghouse discussion of the dispute, noting that they had already contributed years of service to the community and that their experiences and Westernized skills were greatly needed. The "older" men, appalled by the strong language and raw emotion in younger men's speeches as well as by their opinions, claimed exclusive traditional speaking rights. These contested interpretations solidified around a church-versus-community split, which increasingly paralleled the division of older-versus-younger men. Because of the cross-cutting membership structure of the community, the village sides were rendered dysfunctional too. Even simple routines such as the Saturday cleaning of the meetinghouse were impossible to organize. Public festivities and decision making alike had ground to a halt. It appeared that communal identity and "unity of heart," traditionally enshrined as core principles of Nanumean society, had been put on hold by the dispute. This impasse had dragged on for over a year by the time of our visit in 1996.

Most community members held firmly to the hope that time would heal the dispute even if mediation had not, but its intractability was worrisome. People expressed concern that Nanumea's communal orientation was directly threatened by the crisis and might not survive it. We wondered whether the dispute, which prevented normal community interaction month after month, would itself lead to overt structural changes in Nanumean culture and social life. Subtle pressures to bring the community's exchange practices and ideology, social patterns, and political system into closer accord with Western assumptions (implicit in national development efforts and individuals' increasing participation in the world market economy) had been underway in Nanumea for a century and had intensified since independence. Perhaps the issues that had surfaced in the dispute were evidence that value shifts had already occurred. On the other hand, a more optimistic interpretation also seemed plausible. Periods of intense community cooperation and periods

of factional struggle had undoubtedly served as necessary counterpoints in the intense process of community life in the past as well. The island had coped successfully with times of confrontation and dispute before.[9] Perhaps in the next few years, Nanumea would regain some of the cohesion that still appeared to be valued.

The hope that our presence might somehow ease the situation pervaded the Nanumean response to our return in 1996. Because we were "of the island," people were hopeful that the various factions might be willing to set aside their differences to create the appropriate, united welcome for us. Everyone knew that we had seen and participated in earlier days of greater harmony and collective purpose. Several people now involved in the dispute had themselves previously explained the importance of communal values to us and helped us understand how the community coped with historic and recent threats. We knew, as did they, that things now were not quite "as they should be." Because the return of community members after a lengthy absence requires a public welcome, our arrival did offer a natural opportunity to regroup and set the dispute aside. This was surely what people in Funafuti were envisioning when they speculated that our return might prove helpful.

Unfortunately, this outcome was not fully realized in the months that followed. In the capital, things went well. The Nanumean community there, Nanu-Futi, warmly welcomed us back and arranged for our housing. They hosted a well-attended traditional welcome feast, followed by an evening of *faatele*, communal singing, drumming, and dancing that captures the very essence of communitas (Turner 1969). We thought it a poignant commentary that this *faatele* session in the capital opened with "A Galiga o Fenua," a locally composed song extolling "unity of heart" as the source of Nanumea's "true beauty" and enduring strength. We had included this song as a frontispiece in an early ethnographic writing in 1975 because it seemed to capture the communal orientation of Nanumea so evocatively. Its choice to open the evening's festivities, and continuing allusion to this *faatele* in speeches that night, gave voice to concern about the dispute and commitment to community loyalty as a core cultural value.

Though we were welcomed back to Nanumea quite genuinely a month later, the official welcome celebration there was both similar and heart-wrenchingly different from the one in the capital. Again, "A Galiga o Fenua" was chosen to begin the *faatele* festivities, but this time it seemed a plaintive reminder of the communitas that everyone attending knew had disappeared from island life since the dispute. The competitive structure needed for the *faatele* had to be drawn from an ad hoc older-younger division (rather than the established village sides), with fifty-year-olds carefully put into the older

category. Turnout was very low, since those in opposition to the organizers did not attend. The meetinghouse, always crowded in the past, echoed forlornly. Our return clearly had not provided the impetus needed by the community to set aside the hard feelings and angry words from months of dispute.

While on Nanumea, we talked with many community members, trying to understand the varying points of dissension and what communal responsibility now entailed. These discussions led us to ponder our ethnographic relationship to the community and especially to consider how our fieldwork identity had drawn us logically into a hoped-for dispute resolution role. Symbiotic effects seemed to link "who we were" to the community and "what we had come to know" of local life. To what extent had we "naturally" come to focus on the community as a whole as we lived out our "of the island" identity? Had we perhaps paid less attention than we might otherwise have done to the strategic machinations of individuals and families? Not living in a Nanumean household had denied us direct experience of interpersonal joys and strains as well as the acknowledged "research advantages of living with a family and observing it on a daily basis" (Foster 2002:257). To what extent did our resolute conforming to the strictures of an "of the island" identity offer methodological compensation? Due to her Hawaiian birthplace, Anne had gained recognition as a fictive member of the Kau Hawaii (the descendents of a nineteenth-century Hawaiian sailor) but this group was diffuse, including perhaps a quarter of island residents. Being "of the island" had theoretically given us access to all families, but how much do understandings derived from a large network of relationships differ from those based on more-intense experiences with a few? How could we pinpoint exactly what understandings had been gained and lost?

Completely recapturing "who one once was" in earlier fieldwork incarnations is an impossibility, as Wolf has noted (1990). Certainly we ourselves were no longer the young ethnographers who had accepted and then tried to live up to an "of the island" identity back in 1973. We had aged as persons, and we sensed a parallel maturation in our identity. Foster suggests that an ethnographer's expectable progress along the "trajectory from whippersnapper to elder" usually confers research benefits, resulting in greater access to people and information (Foster et al. 1979a:331). That seemed generally to have happened for us, though the process had been gradual, lacking any defining indicators.

## Envisioning a Cultural Constitution

A second and more positive development also occurred in 1996, which helped to clarify how our "of the island" identity might affect our future relationship

with the community. About four years previously, several Nanu-Futi leaders had decided to compile an overview of Nanumean traditional knowledge. This was conceived as a "cultural constitution," a *fakavae* or "foundation" document, that would specify the distinctive customs that set Nanumea apart from other Tuvalu islands and summarize the island's traditional history and sociopolitical institutions. We first heard of the *fakavae* project in Funafuti at about the same time that the dispute was mentioned. One of the initiators, Tagisia Kilei, asked whether we could find out, when we got to Nanumea, what was holding up the *fakavae* progress. We were mystified at first by his request, having only heard the term *fakavae* used to describe the national constitution, so Tagisia explained how the idea had arisen and what the project involved.

Nanu-Futi's leaders had drafted a long list of questions, which Tagisia showed us, carefully typed up, spaced out over nine pages with room for an answer below each question. The document had been sent several years before to the Nanumean atoll community (as the repository of traditional knowledge) with a request that the questions be discussed by elders there and definitively answered. The Nanu-Futi leaders would write up the *fakavae* once the questionnaire had been completed. But several years had already passed. Tagisia had heard that the elders were not able to agree on certain answers, and that this was probably the reason why the questionnaire had not been returned.

The *fakavae* questions were diverse but some dealt with the same issues that the dispute had raised. What were the rules for succession of a reigning chief? Who, or which chiefly group, had responsibility for determining when a chief should step down so a new one might be chosen? What political structure had the island's founder originally imposed, and what traditional accounts provided justification? Many of the questions concerned traditional social organization and ritual, topics we had also pursued during our work. Especially during our first long visit in the seventies, we had spent many hours conversing with the most knowledgeable elders of that era. Most of these people had since passed on and, while the next generation of elders provided replacements, the Nanu-Futi leaders seemed to fear that real expertise about these topics was waning and time was running out.

Could we check into the status of the questionnaire? Would we be willing to push this along if we could? We agreed, highly curious about this insider effort at cultural documentation. Many of the Nanu-Futi leaders had had careers away from Nanumea, in the phosphate-mining centers of Banaba or Nauru, or on other outer islands in the former colony as civil servants. Educated and cosmopolitan, they nevertheless valued the traditions that supported the community's distinctive identity.

They knew that on Nanumea the "old men" still deliberated in the island meetinghouse, new high chiefs were periodically installed, and traditions ranging from interhousehold sharing to "volunteer mothering" were still practiced (though sometimes with varying degrees of unanimity, as the dispute had shown). Nanumea itself remained the heart of the Nanu-Futi community, and many of the urban elite expected to retire "back home" eventually. But other factors were quietly undermining the strength of traditions during the closing decades of the twentieth century, increasingly shifting the orientation away from Nanumea itself to the "bright lights" and opportunities associated with the capital. High-achieving young people were sent to the national boarding school on Vaitupu or to private schools in Fiji or Samoa. Many young men worked on overseas ships for years at a time. Growing numbers of both men and women found their way to jobs in the metropolitan magnet centers of Suva, Auckland, and Sydney. Each year death skimmed off more elders left on the home atoll, and many of those remaining were drawn away to the capital to be cared for by younger relatives or to seek medical care.

Thus it was perhaps not surprising that the leaders of the Nanu-Futi community in Funafuti envisioned a project that would encapsulate Nanumean customs and the traditional basis of leadership roles, or that they wanted a repository of knowledge that they could access as needed. The elders in Nanumea were several days' sea journey away and that community's coherence had recently appeared to be in decline. The dispute made it seem even less likely that the elders could ever agree on answers to the *fakavae* questions. Precisely this juxtaposition of dispute and *fakavae* was probably what led Tagisia to ask for our help. Since we were "of the island" we could be asked to assist, but unlike other community members we had no particular affiliations that would compound already difficult relationships. Our connection had long been demonstrated to lie primarily with the community as a whole, rather than with any single faction. The leaders of the village sides knew that we had taken pains to remain neutral in the past. We were not beholden to the pastor or deacons or linked to the church faction, any more than we were to the younger leaders who advocated change. We were probably about as close to being "neutral insiders" as it was possible to be.

As it turned out, an abbreviated set of answers was waiting on Nanumea even as Tagisia made his request to us, ready to be sent back to the capital on the next boat. Though the returned information provided little elaboration on the more difficult political questions, the elders' responses did allow the *fakavae* project to move ahead once again. Nanu-Futi leaders subsequently asked us to join them in drafting the *fakavae* itself, providing an appropriate

way for our ethnographic "data" on oral history and traditional customs to make its way back to the community as a whole. We used our next sabbatical opportunity and spent five months in Tuvalu in 2003-04 assisting with the "cultural constitution" project. A preliminary draft manuscript (one version in Tuvaluan, the other in English) resulted. This draft is currently being augmented, with Tagisia Kilei continuing work in Funafuti and with our input from time to time.

## "Convenient Fiction"

For us more than thirty years ago, being given an "of the island" identity was reassuring. We interpreted this classification as potentially offering a genuine connection to the community, a basis from which we could develop the much-desired ethnographic role of "outsiders who know something of what it means to be insiders" (Keesing 1991). We felt that we had been offered a mutually convenient starting point for relating with Nanumea's people that would be productive and enduring. The category was indeed convenient in the sense that it did provide us with a workable ethnographic identity for three decades. But, ironically, being "of the island" was a useful identity primarily because it masked our separation from the community so effectively. We were putatively "of" the community, but never really "like" any of its other members. In effect, we became the exception that proved the rule. We were "of the island" in its most generalized and idealized sense. Lacking normal family connections and the constraints these inevitably impose on communal loyalty, we could safely be seen to belong to everyone.

A Nanumean interpretation might place the emphasis differently. Being "of the island" from the islanders' view probably primarily offered us a connection to *community*. Reified and revered, dangerously ephemeral and always contested, *te fenua*, "community," was truly the foundation of Nanumean identity. In our case, though, the connection was a fiction, an identity that never could be fully true because it was idealized, contrasting with the personalized relationships of other community members. Yet extending this category seems a symbolic vote of confidence for us as researchers, but especially for the value of *loto fenua* itself.

In their recent overview of long-term fieldwork, Royce and Kemper emphasize the interconnection between the analytical and personal aspects of research (2002:xxxiii), quoting Geertz: "Everything . . . has both to form the substance of one's personal existence and to be taken as the grist for one's analytical mill. . . . In the field, the anthropologist has to learn to live and to think at the same time" (2000:39). We credit our "of the island" identity with enabling a productive synthesis of ethnographic living and

thinking. Hopefully, it will carry us along a future ethnographic path that both the Nanumean community and we find fulfilling, its fictional nature notwithstanding.

## NOTES

1. For reasons both similar and distinctive concerning positionality, researchers working within their own non-Western communities or their own minority ethnic groups seem to have a parallel advantage. See Jacobs-Huey's discussion of "native scholars" and the contribution these researchers have made to the decolonization of anthropology through reflexive analysis of the complexity of insider-outsider roles when "working at home" (2002).

2. At present, the story is essentially ours. Though we use all the cultural understandings available to us, we have not yet had the opportunity to discuss the ideas in this essay with the Nanumean community. We intend to pursue this in the future, however, in belief that emic perspectives will significantly enrich our analysis and that this essay will provide a useful starting point for these discussions.

3. Our fieldwork in Tuvalu and Nanumea to date has included five visits: May 1973–January 1975 for our initial work; December 1983–June 1984; May–July 1996; a trip by Keith alone in May–June 1998; and sabbatical research from September 2003 to February 2004.

4. The most recent example of our being seen as a single social person in Nanumean eyes occurred in August 2003. We sent a draft of the dedication page for a book of women's songs to a Nanumean friend for editing. He revised our names, which we had listed as "Ane mo Kiti" (Anne and Keith) to read simply as "Ane/Kiti," effectively collapsing us into a single identity.

5. Samuelu seemed to assume from the outset that an "of the island" identity would be appropriate for us, which suggests that this category may have been used as a local strategy to accommodate outsiders in the community. Lutz found that the Micronesian atoll community of Ifaluk (Caroline Islands) also had typically managed contacts with outsiders over the last century by making "insiders" of them (1988:38). On Ifaluk this involved encouraging visitors to "dress and eat in the local style and to observe taboos and other local behavior codes." As an Ifaluk "insider," visitors and researchers such as Lutz were seen as needing special "protection," creating a fieldwork relationship that has some parallels (but also certain important differences) with the fieldwork identity we describe below. One significant difference was that our primary protective relationship was with the community as a whole, whereas Lutz was adopted as a "daughter" into one clan leader's household.

6. "Old men" or "elders" are glosses for Nanumean *taumatua* or the pan-Tuvaluan term *toeaina. Taumatua* can refer to female or male elders, while *toeaina* usually implies a male referent.

7. Lutz's description of the Ifaluk view of "pitiable" persons helped us to conceptualize issues relevant to our own situation. In Ifaluk, "people without kin are pitiable, not only because they are lonely or because they have fewer land and labor resources; such

people are also to be pitied or even scorned because they do not take care of others" and thus lose the possibility of exerting control over, and thereby gaining the respect of, other community members (Lutz 1988:142). After ascribing an "of the island" identity to us, the Nanumean community "took care" of us by designating a roster of families to provide local food. This nurturing role also involved an element of control, in that our potential to develop special relationships with specific families became problematic because of our preexisting connection with the community as a whole.

8. Village "sides," *feitu*, are ubiquitous organizing principles throughout Tuvalu. The two sides' strength and involvement in most aspects of Nanumean life at the time of our initial work was something we took for granted as part of Nanumean "reality." The role of the village sides weakened considerably in subsequent decades.

9. Traditional historical accounts suggest that one of these times of difficulty occurred during the imposition-acceptance of Christianity in the late nineteenth century, which resulted in intense disputes between Christians and "traditionalists."

## REFERENCES

Behar, Ruth
1993 *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Bond, George
1990 Fieldnotes: Research in Past Occurrences. In *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology* edited by Roger Sanjek, 273–298. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Briggs, Jean
1970 *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Chambers, Keith, and Anne Chambers
2001 *Unity of Heart: Culture and Change in a Polynesian Atoll Society*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press.

Crapanzano, Vincent
1986 Hermes Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description. In *Writing Culture*, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus, 51–76. Berkeley: University of California Press.

D'Andrade, Roy
1995 Moral Models in Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 36:399–408.

Flinn, Juliana, Leslie Marshall, and Jocelyn Armstrong, editors
1998 *Fieldwork and Families: Constructing New Models for Ethnographic Research*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Foster, George
2002 A Half Century of Field Research in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico: A Personal View. In *Chronicling Cultures*, edited by Robert Kemper and Anya Royce, 252–283. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.

Foster, George, Thayer Scudder, Elizabeth Colson, and Robert Kemper
1979a Conclusion: The Long-Term Study in Perspective. In *Long-Term Field Research in Social Anthropology*, 323–348. New York: Academic Press.

———, editors
1979b *Long-Term Field Research in Social Anthropology*. New York: Academic Press.

Geertz, Clifford
1973 Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. *In The Interpretation of Culture*, 3–30. New York: Basic Books.
2000 *Available Light*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Jaarsma, Sjoerd, editor
2002 *Handle with Care: Ownership and Control of Ethnographic Materials*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Pittsburgh University Press.

Jackson, Jean
1990 "I Am a Fieldnote": Fieldnotes as a Symbol of Professional Identity. In *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, edited by Roger Sanjek, 3–33. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Jacobs-Huey, Lanita
2002 The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back. *American Anthropologist* 104:791–804.

Johnson, Allen, and Orna Johnson
1990 Quality into Quantity: On the Measurement Potential of Ethnographic Fieldnotes. In *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, edited by Roger Sanjek, 161–186. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Keesing, Roger
1991 Not a Real Fish. In *The Naked Anthropologist*, edited by Phillip DeVita, 73–78. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing.

Kemper, Robert, and Anya Royce, eds.
2002 *Chronicling Cultures: Long-Term Field Research in Anthropology*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.

Lutz, Catherine
1988 *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge* to Western Theory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, George, and Michael Fischer
1986 *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rabinow, Paul
1977 *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Rosaldo, Renato
1989 Grief and the Headhunter's Rage. In *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, 1–21. Boston: Beacon Press.

Royce, Anya, and Robert Kemper
2002 Long-Term Research: Metaphors, Paradigms and Themes. In *Chronicling Cultures: Long-Term Field Research in Anthropology*, edited by Robert Kemper and Anya Royce, xiii-xxxviii. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press.

Salzman, Philip
2002 Pastoral Nomads: Some General Observations Based on Research in Iran. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 58 (2): 245–264.

Sanjek, Roger
1990a On Ethnographic Validity. In *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, edited by Roger Sanjek, 385–418. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.\

———, editor
1990b *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy
1995 The Primacy of the Ethical. *Current Anthropology* 36:409–420.

Turner, Victor
1969 *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Wolf, Margery
1990 Chinanotes: Engendering Anthropology. In *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, edited by Roger Sanjek, 343–355. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.