

Distribution

When a turtle or other sacred fish was caught in the old days, it was carried to the village meeting ground (malae) for ceremonial prayers of thanks offered to the god Tui Tokelau. The turtle was put on display for all to view, and later killed and cut up by a specially appointed man (tauvaega) who divided it among the people (Macgregor 1937).

Considerable ceremony and socialization are still associated with the distribution of a turtle. The tauvaega, or inati supervisor, presides over a team of men and boys that systematically divide the turtle into delectable portions assigned to each family in the village. The entire turtle is consumed, except for the bile, scales, gut contents and, occasionally, the shell. While at Fakaofu, I was able to watch the full procedure of processing and distribution of the two turtles found stranded on the reef. The tauvaega of Fakaofu, Kalepo Mativa, as well as Nemia Tuvala and other participants, were most accommodating in allowing me full access to the work area and permission to take numerous photographs. The following is a descriptive account of this event, starting when the turtles were first captured at about noontime on October 22, 1981.

After being retrieved from the reef, the two turtles were transported by boat to the village motu of Fenua Fale, where they were placed on their bellies in the shade close to the lagoon shore. Although the turtles were not injured in any way, they exhibited very little activity or alertness, unlike the green turtles I am familiar with in Hawaii. They made no attempt

to crawl to the water, even though it was in clear view just a few meters away. Furthermore, none of the villagers seemed concerned that they would try to escape. The only explanation I can offer for the turtles' lethargic behavior is that their earlier mating activity had left them in an exhausted state. This would be consistent with the fact that they did not swim off the reef when they sensed the tide receding, but rather allowed themselves to become stranded.

An inter-atoll rugby tournament was scheduled to take place that day, so after considerable discussion it was decided to postpone processing the turtles until the next morning. The turtles were eventually turned over on their backs where they remained unattended throughout the night.

Starting at about 8 p.m. and lasting until after midnight, traditional singing and dancing took place at the village meeting house as part of the festivities of the general council meeting. The turtles were well within hearing distance of this merriment, but not in the immediate vicinity. In keeping with the Tokelauan spirit of pride and friendly competition, people from Nukunonu later told me that turtles at their atoll are much better looked after, and never left alone, when they have to be held overnight. Ateli Perez, an elder at Nukunonu that was quoted by Huntsman (1977), provided some interesting insight on this tradition in a speech he gave at the Nukunonu meeting house on October 10, 1967:

"We are all singing here in keeping with the ancient custom to which we still adhere. When a pair of turtles are captured in the late afternoon and are not used, old ladies come and guard over the turtle couple, sitting at the side and sing songs to cause them to stay awake. So we are sitting here at the side of the turtles and we sing. Because of another ancient belief, we come and sit beside the turtles lest a bush spirit (gaveve) steal them in the night. This is an ancient custom to which we still hold to this very night. This is the meaning of our joy-making and singing here."

The processing of the two turtles at Fakaofu started at about 8 a.m. A number of people, including many children, were gathered in the area. The turtles were first stunned in the traditional Tokelauan manner of delivering 5 to 6 heavy blows to the ventral neck and pectoral regions using a blunt instrument, in this case the hammer side of a long-handled axe. This causes massive hemorrhaging to occur internally, with very little blood actually leaving the body. When I first heard of this method, I was admittedly apprehensive of its effectiveness from a humane standpoint. However, after seeing it take place, I am convinced that it is actually less harsh than many of the techniques employed elsewhere throughout the world. Sea turtles are simply not easy animals to kill or render unconscious by any method.

Immediately after striking the turtles, the plastron was removed by cutting along the border with a sharp knife. While this was still in progress, other workers were reaching into the turtle and ladling out all of the blood that had collected in the body cavity. Still other workers were busy building a number of small fires on coral stones for use as cooking stoves. Two of these sites were used to stew the blood in large metal pots.

The eggs in the female were carefully separated from the oviduct and counted into baskets woven from palm fronds. A total of 300 was present. All of them were immature with no signs of shelling starting to take place. It is therefore likely that the turtle had not yet laid her first clutch of eggs for the season.

After being separated from the body, the flippers, head, tail and plastron were singed in the fires to loosen the keratinous epidermal scales. Each piece was then meticulously peeled clean of this inedible material. The four front flippers with the meaty pectoral regions still attached were each taken

and presented as gifts to the visiting people from Atafu, Nukunonu and Apia, and the general council meeting delegates.

The stomach and intestines were removed in one piece and carried a short distance into the lagoon where they were cut open lengthwise and washed clean. Along with the other viscera, this material was cut up into sections and combined with the remaining pieces of meat, bone and cartilage.

The two shells were not cut up, but rather were initially intended to be saved as decoration for the village meeting house. This plan was later changed when offers were made to the Council of Elders to buy the shells. As a result, one was sold to a Tokelauan living in Apia, and the other to a Tokelauan currently residing on Fakaofu who eventually intends to return to New Zealand where he has lived for some years. According to Kalolo Mika, turtle shells have traditionally been cut up and eaten after removing the horny scutes. It was explained that the shell, which is mostly bone, is usually given to the young men because their teeth are strong enough to chew on it. On the other hand, the plastron, which has less bone and more cartilage and therefore is easier to chew, is given to the older people whose teeth may not be as good.

When the processing was completed, Kalepo supervised the other workers in assembling the proper allotment for each family or inati group. To serve as a guide, he had a list of the 76 family names for Fakaofu and the number of people in each unit. The quantity and composition of the shares seemed to be very carefully considered before a decision was reached. Because a sizable amount of the turtle meat had been given to the visitors, it was necessary to incorporate portions of a village-owned pig so that each share

would be adequate. When the apportionment was finally completed, all of the shares rested on palm-frond mats spread out neatly on the ground. A call was then given throughout the village signifying that children from each family should come to the area. After everyone had arrived, Kalepo read off each name and the children came forward with a bowl or basket to claim their share. At that time, a few immature eggs were also added by the workmen. The food was subsequently taken back to each family home where it was prepared for the afternoon meal. Methods of cooking include wrapping the meat in leaves and baking it under fire-heated rocks, or grilling the meat right on top of the rocks. The stewed blood, along with small pieces of meat and viscera that had been added, were not distributed but instead eaten by the workers when their duties were finished. The entire butchering and distribution process ended at about 11:30 a.m. and took 3 1/2 hours.

The activities that I observed at Fakaofo differed in a few respects from the information supplied by Macgregor (1937) for Atafu, and by Huntsman (1969) for Nukunonu. Macgregor (1937) mentioned that the person who first sighted a turtle was entitled to claim a larger share. None of my informants indicated that this practice is followed at the present time. Huntsman (1969) stated that at Nukunonu the parts of the male and female turtles were kept separate and used in equal quantities whenever possible to make up the shares. I saw no evidence of this at Fakaofo, however the fact that large portions of the meat were given as gifts may have influenced the distribution procedure. For Nukunonu, Huntsman (1969) also indicated that the head, along with the heart, liver and kidneys, were allocated to either the Mission personnel, the doctor, the oldest man in the village, or the workers that processed the turtle. My informants at Fakaofo told me that until recently the head was presented to

the oldest man in the village as a token of respect. While this custom was not being followed at the time of my visit, there were plans to ask the Council of Elders to have it reinstated. According to Kalolo Mika, the head of a turtle is still always given to the oldest man at Atafu. Luciano Perez explained to me that the traditional "head portion" at Nukunonu incorporates some of the neck and a nice piece of adjoining meat from the pectoral area.

Based on the shell lengths, I estimated that the total *edible* weight of the two turtles distributed at Fakaofu was not less than 190 kg, or 280 g (.62 lbs) for every man, woman and child that lives on the atoll. Using the same estimate for edible weight, and the data previously presented on human population (page 7) and number of turtles captured (page 13), it is possible to compute the approximate amount of turtle consumed per person during each breeding season. The resulting values would be 1.4 kg (3.1 lbs) for Fakaofu, 5.4 kg (11.9 lbs) for Nukunonu, and 2.5 kg (5.5 lbs) for Atafu. These quantities make a distinct contribution to the protein nutrition of the Tokelauan people. However, in order to be accurately appraised, the values must also be viewed in light of the enjoyment that is derived from eating this highly-prized and savory food.

Other Cultural Aspects

During the course of my visit to Tokelau, and related literature research, a number of miscellaneous cultural components involving sea turtles were identified. These interesting aspects are described as follows.

The School Principal at Atafu, Tenise Atoni, told me that the uneaten bone scraps from the shares received by each family are usually thrown into

the ocean in the belief that they will attract turtles to the atoll. In Hawaii the opposite view is held, at least with raw turtle parts and blood. At this location, discarding such material into the sea is believed to drive turtles away.

There is a Tokelauan expression called "hila fonu" which is often said when a particular red sunset is observed. Hosea Kirifi told me that this environmental event means a turtle is likely to come ashore in the evening. Macgregor (1937) also mentioned this expression, which he wrote as "la sila fonu" and translated as "the sun like a turtle's breastplate." This was listed as a descriptive Tokelauan phrase for an "orange reflection of the sunset in the clouds, common near the equator."

Macgregor (1937) stated that in the old days the ear lobes of all babies were perforated shortly after birth, and that earrings of turtle shell or bone were sometimes inserted later in life. Although a number of people that I encountered had a pierced ear, none of them had this type of earring. Macgregor (1937) also described the ancient use of turtle bones made into tattoo puncturing instruments (pakiau) and thatching awls for splitting pandanus leaves. I found no indication of these items being used at the present time. Tattooing is reported to have been banned when the missionaries first arrived.

Throughout the Pacific islands the thick horny scutes from the shell of the hawksbill turtle were formerly a premium material for making fishhooks. Two types were crafted in Tokelau; the one-piece hook used for line fishing with bait, and the composite hook used for trolling from a canoe or casting from shore (Macgregor 1937). Iron hooks and plastic lures have now replaced these traditional products, mostly because they are convenient to obtain,

but also due to the present scarcity of adult hawksbills necessary for procuring the raw material. I did, however, learn of a possible renewed interest in making the traditional hooks and teaching this skill to the younger generation. In this regard, I was even asked if I knew of a source where hawksbill scutes could be bought for such a purpose.

Tokelauan handicrafts are recognized as being among the finest made in the Pacific islands. The most commonly produced items are woven baskets, fans and mats, and small boxes with tightly-fitting lids carved from kanava wood. Two other crafted items also of superb quality, but less commonly seen, are carved wooden turtles and authentic-looking turtle shells. The shell replicas are usually made from *Messerschmidia* ("tausunu" wood). Iere Kirifi of Fakaofu is a master woodcarver of these fine objects.

Since the willing conversion of the people to Christianity, there has been no form of worship to the ancient god, Tui Tokelau, even though a portion of this coral-rock image is still present in the meeting house at Fakaofu. An invocation said to Tui Tokelau in the old days asked that the heavens send down the necessities of life to their small atolls - rain, calm, light, coconut blossoms, fish, and among other things, "he tai fonu" (plenty of turtle).

Singing and dancing continue to be an integral part of the Tokelauan culture. One of the traditional songs for dancing that Macgregor (1937) recorded from Kalolo Mika's father in 1932 tells of a turtle hunt in which Tinilau, a mischievous character of Polynesian mythology, allows the turtle to escape. The title of this short composition is "Song of Catching the Turtle," and the translated words are as follows.

"The turtle of the deep sea,
The turtle of the deep sea is hunted.
Chase away the young children.
Who congratulates Tinilau
Alas! there is nothing.
Tinilau continues to dance."



Kalepo Mativa, the tauvaega of Fakaofu, presiding over the distribution of turtle meat



Village children at Fakaofu who have just received their family share of turtle meat and immature eggs

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SEA TURTLES AND THEIR TRADITIONAL USAGE IN TOKELAU

A project report prepared for the World Wildlife Fund-U.S.
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