

# ‘Cutting the Colonial Cord’? Tensions of Value and the Relationship between Tokelau and New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

*This article discusses concepts of self-government, dependence and independence in the light of Tokelau and New Zealand practices. Kin-based forms of mutual dependence are compared with the demands for specific forms of self-governance practiced by the New Zealand administration. Tensions of value have emerged between village based political leadership, and the public servants of the administrative infrastructure. The smallness of Tokelau’s land area is complemented by its considerable maritime resources secured by an Exclusive Economic Zone. Tokelau’s need for New Zealand administrative support to administer its fishing quotas, and for military policing of its maritime boundaries, makes Tokelau dependent on the greater power. The relationships of dependency going the other way, that is New Zealand’s dependence on the marine wealth of Tokelau and its strategic value as Pacific partner, are largely obscured by the policies that demand Tokelau reaches an internationally approved standards of governmental practices for it to be able to govern its own affairs. The two forms of dependency, one based on reciprocity and mutuality, and the other, rooted in an economic logic of self-sufficiency are entangled in everyday life in Tokelau. However, the practices of economic self-sufficiency work over time to erode the viability of the local subsistence economy.*

Keywords: Tokelau, New Zealand, relationships of dependence, tensions of value, aid, gifts, subsistence, accountability.

## INTRODUCTION

Self-government can be understood in many ways: as political independence; as free association with a former colonial power; or as a condition simply taken for granted, as a fact of how the affairs of everyday life are run. For many, the known history of Tokelau consists of the latter interpretation: self-government as simply the way things are governed has been dominant in local perception for long periods of time. In this experience of self-governance village councils have constituted the highest political and legal authority in practical everyday

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The title of this paper refers to an article in The New Zealand Herald from October 9, 2007, by Pacific issues reporter Angela Gregory, which states ‘Tokelauans tipped to cut colonial cord to Wellington’ and continues: ‘Atolls in line for EU and UN funds if they vote in new poll to become self-governing’.

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matters. Historically, the villages (*nuku*) were governed through a system of leadership in which their male elders (*toaina*) or family heads (*matai*) set the weekly and monthly agendas of work and other activities, and in this manner orchestrated village affairs.

The three atolls of Tokelau - Fakaofu, Nukunonu and Atafu - are situated 508 km north of independent Samoa. During self-governance, their village residents focused inwards on their own concerns, on collective work of different kinds such as fishing, food gathering and preparation, road and house maintenance, weaving, sports activities, musical performances, and church attendance. The rhythm of their everyday life was also punctuated by felicitous and unfortunate encounters with visitors, either close atoll neighbors, or travelers from further afar. These visitors could be either friendly or hostile. They came on various kinds of *malaga* (visiting parties) that sometimes brought alternative, strongly held views on how local governance ought to be done.

In the earliest known period that features in Tokelau oral history, the control over village governance on Nukunonu was disrupted by a hostile take-over by Fakaofu. They consolidated their position as 'overlords' over Nukunonu by taking a chiefly woman, Nau from Nukunonu. This allowed Kava Vasefenua, the *aliki* or ruler of Fakaofu to establish a dominant genealogy as *te fenua o aliki*, chiefly land, a status they occasionally claim to this day (Hooper and Huntsman 1985; Macgregor 1937). The third atoll, Atafu was populated later, by Tonuia, the offspring of Kava. From then on, the genealogical relationships between the three atolls were entwined, and marked in village speeches that addressed them by the terms the Faleiva (*i.e.* nine-houses, Fakaofu), Falefa (four houses, Nukunonu), and Falefitu (seven houses, Atafu). The first written accounts of Tokelau attest to this order, which was quickly and dramatically altered when misfortune struck in the early 1860s. The atoll societies experienced visitors of many kinds, ranging from slave raiders who decimated the male able-bodied population, to missionaries of two denominations, Protestant from the London Missionary Society and Roman Catholics, from the Marist Society. The two missions were established in the atolls from the 1860s.

The devastating illnesses brought by the foreign visitors were accompanied by a severe drought and famine. Traders and fortune hunters also came, but they did not succeed in alienating land to any significant degree. There was a fourth atoll, mid-way to Samoa, Olohega, which was used as a plantation, and was subsequently, in 1979, ceded. It became incorporated as part of American Samoa (see Hoëm 2004:25). In 1915, Nukunonu petitioned their then colonial masters to be free from Fakaofu's overlordship. This was accepted, when the British declared that there should not be a 'colony within a colony' (Hooper et al. 1992:46). In 1925, New Zealand took over responsibility for Tokelau, and has held that position since. In 1961, as the United Nations placed de-colonization on its agenda, things were set for yet new encounters in Tokelau with new perceptions of how things should be run.

The French relationships with their so-called overseas territories differed from that of New Zealand and its former colonies, such as Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands and Tokelau. To enter the list of decolonizing countries is voluntary, and France chose not to be on the list, that is follow the United Nations' agenda of decolonization. However, New Zealand did, and it redefined its external relationships with its smaller island territories in the Pacific region. The then Western Samoa (until 1997) now Samoa, gained independence from New Zealand in 1962, while Tutuila, Manu'a and the other islets of eastern Samoa have kept a so-called unincorporated status within US territory. The Cook Islands became self-governing and in a free association with New Zealand in 1965, as did Niue in 1974. Of these places, Niue is perhaps the most comparable with Tokelau, for it is approximately similar in population size and with a social organization that resembles Tokelau's. Niue is well known to Tokelauans as a destination for scholarships and higher education. In Tokelau, in the mid-1980s at the time of my first fieldwork, Niue was not seen as a desirable model for development according to the local politicians and local public administrators at the time.

The prevailing opinions were generally that Niue was a sad place, where many of its residents left for New Zealand, and where those who stayed behind had meaningless jobs working in public administration. Tokelau, on the other hand was a place which enjoyed more positive views, a place where life was still meaningful, where work was hard, and there was fun to be had. The basis of this vitality was the value placed on the cooperative, sharing spirit, or *maopoopo* as it is called. Some thirty years later, it is time to take account of what happened to Tokelau, in light of the situation they enjoyed in the mid-1980s, and the choices that still lay ahead for them.

In order to do so, we need to look at local ways of conceptualizing relationships, while paying particular attention to notions of dependence and independence. This will allow us to identify and discuss a recurrent pattern in events central to shaping the political future of Tokelauan self-government. The argument throughout is that ‘tensions of value’ emerge from different ways of practicing and conceiving of relationships, between Tokelau and New Zealand, but in ways that with some variation are common throughout the Pacific. The concept of tensions of value is based on my reading of David Graeber. He presented value as human creativity, and as ‘a mode of coordinating projects of human action’, in other words as generative of systems of production and reproduction. Social interaction brings life-worlds, or as he called it ‘universes’, into being through the exchange of value (Graeber 2013:220). Furthermore, the different ways of conceiving of relationships are ultimately related to and has their roots in qualitatively different kinds of socioeconomic practices.

The different interpretations of ‘dependence’ that I use draw on the analysis laid out by Ferguson (2013). In that article, Ferguson presents an argument for a more nuanced view on processes of so-called liberation and political independence, based on his work in Sub-Saharan Africa. He describes how, often due to violent conflict and precarious life situations, people frequently choose and prefer voluntary dependence to the vagaries of independence. To be under the protection and support of a powerful leader is clearly preferable to the vulnerability of living without support. Where his argument becomes of more general anthropological interest is in his demonstration of social networks of dependence that can be seen as life-support systems, frequently of long historical standing. A similar observation has been made by Marshall Sahlins, in an article with a title signaling that he was taking to task the nostalgia for vanishing worlds that he saw emanating from the ethnographic orientation of anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss. ‘Goodbye to “Tristes Tropes”’ describes the cultural significance of networks of kin across the Pacific, with Sahlins arguing that migration does not represent cultural loss, but provides support and security for new generations of global travelers with roots in the Pacific region, but often also now residing in far-flung diasporic communities in the USA and elsewhere (Sahlins 1993a).

In the Tokelau atoll communities, as is commonly observed throughout the Pacific today, there are qualitatively different ways of practicing relationships, which we, for the sake of simplicity, may define as collectivistic and individualistic. Their mutual entanglement in everyday life has been demonstrated by Besnier (2011). On a general and abstract level, there are qualitatively different, antithetical modes of production that can be identified as an individualistic economic model of capital accumulation and a collectively oriented economic model based on communal subsistence production and a sharing of goods. Importantly for our argument, the central values of the capitalistic model, that which grants individual agency or freedom of action, also rests on the principle of administrative and political economic accountability. In contrast, the central values for the distribution of goods in the so-called *inati*-system of Tokelau rests on a principle antithetical to that of individual self-sufficiency. In this model, participation in collectives is precisely what provides personal agency. Accountability according to this system rests on a sense of willing participation and submission to a higher authority, of being present and willing to be counted

in. When everyone participates and contributes, the collective is said to be *maopoo*, well organized and beautiful. This kind of agency rests on an acceptance (*uhitaki*) of total social transparency and a high degree of social control (*pule*); its freedom and benefits achieved at the cost of being part of a system of dependency, in the sense described by Ferguson (Hoëm 2015b).

#### DEVELOPMENT AND THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF TOKELAU'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

The total land area of Tokelau is 10.8 km<sup>2</sup>. The nautical zone (established first with the Tokelau Act in 1948) is 200 Nautical Miles. As mentioned above, Tokelau's relationship with New Zealand began in 1925. From the mid-1950s, Tokelau has been receiving increasing external economic investment. Its first formally recognized inter-atoll political gathering was also held around this time. Local institutions of education, health care and small cooperative stores were established, run mainly by local staff. An important change in Tokelau's relations with the outside world came with the introduction of a scholarship scheme. Originally a plan was developed to relocate all inhabitants of Tokelau to New Zealand and use the atolls for coconut-plantations. The rationale for this proposal was the cost of keeping Tokelauans in reasonable standards of living. Due to perceived overcrowding, and an immediate hurricane scare the solution of total migration was proposed. This initiative was quickly abandoned however, as it proved to be unacceptable to Tokelauans. Instead, a scholarship scheme was launched which resulted in chain migration to New Zealand from 1968 (Hoëm 2019; Hooper 1982; Hooper et al. 1992). Meanwhile, life in Tokelau continued to be mainly subsistence oriented. Fishing, small scale farming and copra sales were the main sources of income, supplemented by a small but increasing monetary sphere associated with administrative work in the schools, hospitals and cooperative stores. The island suffers from a shortage of water, and the residents are accustomed to enduring periods of scarcity, though not as severe as the period of drought followed by famine that had such fatal consequences in the 1860s, as described above.

The trans-regional relationships of Tokelau, that is, its relationships reaching beyond the Pacific region, have grown and evolved over time with greater global integration. In the first half of the last century Tokelau was in a situation described as 'benign neglect' (Hooper 1982). In this period the atoll villagers had only sporadic contacts with the other atolls and the administrative powers of New Zealand. The infrequent external contacts and absence of outside interest in this period have been attributed to the financial crisis of the 1930s and the two World Wars. In the period from 1925 until the early 1980s, Tokelau was largely left to govern its own affairs. Following this early colonial period with little external interaction came a period of increasingly intense contact from 1976 until today. A major impetus for this change in Tokelau's situation came with the first visit by a delegation from the United Nations. This visit was prompted by New Zealand having signed up as member of the 'Committee of 24', the umbrella organization for the United Nations promoting the decolonization of territories, such as Tokelau.

Since that mid-1970s ground-breaking UN visit (Hooper 2006), considerable time, effort, and money have been invested by Tokelau and their counterparts in order to create an internationally acceptable infrastructure for governance. Meeting criteria such as a well-run public service, financial accountability and clear lines of governance was and still is, considered a necessary precondition for Tokelau to be able to run its own government as a semi-independent state in so-called free association with New Zealand (Angelo 2009; Hoëm 2015b; Huntsman and Kalolo ). A New Zealand lawyer involved with the drafting of

Tokelau's constitution, Tony Angelo, who has followed the attempts to achieve internationally satisfactory standards of governance by Tokelau, commented that the leaders of Tokelau repeatedly questioned the necessity of this external political demand, as they already considered themselves as running their own affairs (Angelo 2001, 2009).

In the mid-1980s, New Zealand anthropologist, Hooper (1982), carried out an ethnographic study of the growing aid-driven monetary sphere in Tokelau. Hooper, together with Judith Huntsman, had already devoted years of anthropological attention to Tokelau. In this particular work, drawing on Wallerstein's (1974) world systems theory, or what came to be referred to under the heading 'dependency-theory', Hooper describes how outside investment commencing in the mid-1980s intended to produce local development, instead served to produce relations of dependency. He was clearly of the opinion that these investments were not conducive to generating locally sustainable growth.

On the one hand, and in light of the contemporary situation in the atoll societies, the increasing dominance of the monetary sphere has brought about a development that many locals would describe as positive. There has been a steady growth in material wealth, better health services and schooling, and the possibility of overseas travel is accessible to many, if not all. On the other hand, the improvement of health care has sadly been necessitated by a marked increase in lifestyle related illnesses such as hypertension and diabetes. Furthermore, and supporting Hooper's analysis, the subsistence based *inati*-sharing system of collective work and village communal organization, has clearly been weakened. There are observable tensions between the way of life that in Tokelauan is described positively as relationships of dependence and mutual support, and the '*palagi-way*' (i.e. 'western' lifestyle) that is judged more negatively, associated with values of independence and freedom (for another example that describes similar tensions see Syndicus, this volume). With the massive increase in resources, a growing public sector and a monetary economy, we have seen a social divide emerge. An 'elite' strata of people have jobs that bind them to an international work circuit, which requires them to travel and spend much time away from the villages. The travel provides access to better health care and the salaries are markedly different from that experienced by members of the village work force. This relatively recent (emerging over approximately the last 30 years) rising social inequality confirms Hooper's scenario. The value placed on formal education as the main instrument to achieve a better future also served to erode local survival skills and subsistence activities, of which the perhaps most skill-demanding is open-ocean fishing, a male activity (cf. Hoëm 2018; Huntsman and Kalolo 2007).

Significantly, the only resource of importance to the world at large, except for its strategic political value, is fishing in the economic exclusive zone (see also McCormack, this volume). A Bulletin from the Government of Tokelau (2019) writes:

The people of Tokelau are New Zealand citizens. Their relationship hailed by the United Nations as a model for other territories and administering countries to follow [sic]. The population of 1499 (2016 census) is spread approximately equally among the three atolls (Atafu (541); Fakaofu (506) and Nukunonu (452)). The traditional lifestyle was subsistence but Tokelau has moved to a cash economy. The only natural resource of any current economic significance is the fishery of the exclusive economic zone.

Apart from the helping to shift livelihood from subsistence to a monetary economy, it is important also to note that the surveillance and policing of this fishing zone binds Tokelau to New Zealand's military and diplomatic agencies to ensure its safe-guarding. Tokelau's need for protection is counterweighed by the fact that Tokelau is also of strategic value to

New Zealand. That New Zealand appreciates this fact is noticeable in what is called New Zealand's Pacific Reset policy, 'Building Relations amid Increased Regional Competition', (comparable to Australia's similarly labeled 'Pacific Step-Up' policy) (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade 2019). Both policies 'are designed to make a noticeable re-engagement within the region in the face of increased strategic competition from China'. An article in an Asia-Pacific periodical explains how 'one of the primary drivers of New Zealand's foreign policy is its shared regional identity as a Polynesian country'. The article continues: 'This forms a vital pillar of New Zealand's regional credibility as it provides a demonstration of the familial and cultural links the country has with its Pacific neighbors' (Wyeth 2019). From this and similar media comments and analyses, we can glean that there is some degree of acknowledgement and acceptance of the significance of 'Polynesian' relationships. Paradoxically then, the Pacific Reset policy confirms and encourages a kind of Pacific relationality, in this case envisaged as a politically meaningful, long-standing connection between New Zealand and Tokelau. In other words, the same relationship of long-standing interdependence, which is commonly denied or obscured by the discourse of aid-logic and development (that often celebrates itself as producing local independence) is in certain political speech-making contexts encouraged.

#### INNOVATIONS IN TOKELAU INSTITUTIONS OF GOVERNANCE

The mid-1980s saw a significant breakthrough in the relationship between Tokelau and New Zealand that saw Tokelau moving towards greater independence. Until then, the process towards a possible Tokelau act of self-determination had stalled as it had run into a serious obstacle. In the way was the ancient position of Fakaofu as *fenua o aliki*, the chiefly land, and their contested claim to be hereditary rulers of Tokelau. Fakaofu blocked self-determination by demanding that its status should be first accepted by the other two atolls. Nukunonu and Atafu however refused to accept Fakaofu's bid for power within a possible new government structure. Fakaofu argued that they should host the new capital and its new government and central public service offices. In an inter-atoll meeting in the late 1980s, the then New Zealand Administrator to Tokelau, B. Absolum broke this impasse, and presented a motion containing a model of periodical rotation of governance between the three atolls. Since then, Tokelau has experienced successive stages of delegation of powers from the New Zealand Administration to the newly constructed village and inter-atoll institutions. The making of local infrastructures of governance, in the period from 1993 to 2003 was called the Modern House project. In this period, some significant innovations were made to the Tokelau system of governance. An acting council of what had previously been Village Governors (*Faipule*, *i.e.* those in command over external relations) was put in place as the acting government of Tokelau. The Council of Faipule was the *de facto* government of Tokelau in the interim periods when its new national assembly, the inter-atoll meeting (General *Fono*), was not in session. The Council of Faipule was later expanded to include Village Mayors (*Pulenuku*). In other words, this ongoing government of Tokelau as it was called, was built on two administrative offices imported from the older colonial administration in Samoa and introduced to Tokelau in 1925.

The incongruity of this newly constructed 'ongoing' government institution soon became problematic as it created frictions between the emerging national and the village levels of governance. The tension was focused on the public service, the educated elite, who were in a position open to exercise of undue influence. In short, the public servants could easily come to run the new national political institutions, while being assigned the function of assisting these. The subsequent New Zealand Administrator, L. Watt, attempted to rectify

this situation by turning the newly constructed political order on its head. The result was that the village councils were back to their original position, as the political leaders of all Tokelau government institutions. A member of one of the village councils commented at the time that this amounted to short-circuiting the political development that had been achieved so far. He phrased it as they 'put an end to The Modern House of Tokelau', as it would deprive the village leadership and the 'ongoing government of the *faipule* and *pukenukus*' of the support of internationally knowledgeable expertise. At this stage, in 2003, the General Fono was an inter-atoll gathering that began to function as the national assembly. The General Fono consisted mainly of representatives from the village councils, but with a few seats for women and youth representatives. Its members were elected by popular vote to be representatives for the village councils that then chose a leader to act as head of Tokelau. The Ulu, a previously non-existent position, was chosen for a three-year period. This leadership position, according to the power-sharing model advocated by Absolum, was to rotate amongst the three atolls. The transformation of Tokelau governance institutions was complete when in the final act of devolution, the public services were placed under the control of the village councils. The Tokelau Public Service was no longer a part of the New Zealand States Services Commission (SSC).

#### TOKELAU AND NEW ZEALAND PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP: GIFTS AND AID

A fundamental fact of life in Tokelau is its meager land resources and extensive marine environment. Its closest neighbor, Samoa lies just over 500 km away to the south. The distance between the atolls is also considerable: 99 km from the northernmost atoll Atafu to Nukunonu, and 68.29 km from Nukunonu to Fakaofu, the southernmost. Accessibility has always been a key issue, and transport to and from Tokelau has been the responsibility of the New Zealand Administration since 1925. In the period following World War 2, local travel between the atolls was forbidden, as it was perceived as representing a considerable risk of perishing at sea. More recently, the issue of finding a safe and viable means of transport between Tokelau and Samoa has been of vital importance to Tokelauans, and the issue has been debated endlessly. An airstrip has been suggested and routinely dismissed. This is because land in general is inalienable, that is, there exists no legal entitlement permitting sale or handover, and what little communal land that does exist has been deemed too small and/or unsuitable. Throughout this time Tokelau has been ill-served by various otherwise decommissioned and sub-standard boats (the MVs *Frysna*, *Cenpac Rounder* and the *Wairua*, to name a few). In the early 1990s the situation for travel between the atolls improved somewhat. Until then, travel between the atolls was rare, except for the boat to and from Samoa every six weeks or so. This often meant that any visitor would have to spend either a day or so visiting a chosen atoll, or remain for six weeks for the next boat to return. A smallish vessel, the *Tutolu*, was bought to run between the atolls for visits to relatives, sports events and political - and other work-related meetings. Since then, this vessel has been the main means of travel to and from Tokelau, and it is supplemented with additional chartered vessels for big events (frequently the *Lady Naomi*, a vessel that belongs to Tuvalu).

The National Assembly of Tokelau, the General Fono, has debated the issue of acquiring a boat repeatedly through its formation in the early 1950s. As Tokelau is, according to the United Nations, a 'Non-Self-Governing Territory', the responsibility of ensuring means of communication in principle rests with New Zealand. New Zealand officials have repeatedly assured Tokelau, throughout this and much of the previous century, of their intention of providing Tokelau with a boat. This situation was partially remedied in 2014, when a

Danish firm was commissioned to build a boat for Tokelau. In 2006 and 2007, Tokelau held their first ever referendum on their future relationship with New Zealand. If this boat had materialized earlier, at least prior to the first referendum, there is a small likelihood that the outcome of the vote would have been different. The part of the constituency voting against Tokelau self-government won by a narrow margin in the first referendum. These voters expressed a strong suspicion that New Zealand wished to terminate their relationship with Tokelau, or 'cut the cord', as they called it. They strongly preferred a continued relationship of (inter)dependence, fearing the consequences of being cut-off from the political, financial and military support of New Zealand.

The first referendum represented the culmination of three decades of *malaga* (hosting of visiting delegations) involving the UN, the New Zealand administration, and the employees of the Tokelau Public Service. Integral to these visits was the labor-intensive work of ceremonial gift giving or *mea alofa*, that involves food, but also fine objects such as woven hats, fans, shell necklaces, and the occasional fine mat or pearl shell lure. These gifts presented by Tokelau to its guests on the increasingly frequent visits by New Zealand and UN delegations, were matched by increasing financial investments by New Zealand. Many Tokelauans worried that with the proposed referendum, New Zealand intended to terminate this highly beneficial reciprocal exchange relationship. The most obvious object that symbolized this mutual relationship was an ocean-going vessel. A boat—a prototypically inalienable object—came to be seen as an object that rightfully belonged to Tokelau, after having been elicited through decades of gift-giving that had brought to fruition the relationship with New Zealand (Hoëm forthcoming). From the perspective of aid logic and development, effective transport was an instrument in 'lifting' the status of Tokelau, that could be rightfully financed by aid money. From the perspective of Tokelau exchange, the boat was the fitting return gift to the *tamamanu*, a term meaning orphan, a little bird; someone in need of the support of others, that had been earned through years of labor of love and generosity to visitors (*mea alofa*) (cf. Stasch 2009 and this volume). Had this boat been more than a vague promise at the time of the first referendum, the perception that New Zealand wished to terminate the relationship with Tokelau may not have taken hold (Hoëm 2015b).

The second referendum did not result in enough votes in support of self-determination. This time, the reasons behind the public vote had less to do with efficient transport between Tokelau and the rest of the world. Instead at issue was the strength and independence of Tokelau customary law, and in particular the recent delegation of judicial powers from New Zealand to local institutions. In the period preceding the popular vote, one of the villages was divided on how to handle a case of alleged incest. Local leadership argued that the customary method of conflict resolution, an *ifoga* or public apology on a Samoan model, was sufficient redress. The accused was a person of considerable authority, being a pastor, and many were of the opinion that such a case should be treated according to international law. New Zealand authorities were consulted. However, having recently delegated judicial powers to the new Tokelau institutions they came to the conclusion that it would be wrong for them to interfere. A sufficiently large proportion of the voters, as a result of this experience of being at the mercy of their own legal system and their own local leaders, came to the conclusion that a yes vote for self-determination was not in their best interests. Despite having invested so much in building Tokelau structures of government, many saw a vote for 'independence' as akin to standing alone. To stand alone, without the support of external legal advisors, was to be at the mercy of local leaders who were perceived to have favored the alleged offender.

This legal stance by New Zealand of deciding not to interfere was forgotten or deemed not relevant in another case we shall discuss here: a much publicised political controversy concerning the purchase of two helicopters by two senior public servants. Interestingly, the



public discourse that followed the purchase was clothed throughout in language that attributed the subsequent conflict over the purchase as related to Tokelauan excessive dependence on aid. It was also attributed to Tokelau not having adequate political and administrative competence to run its own affairs in a manner acceptable to its aid-donors. The need for reliable transport to Samoa, and the possibility of a rapid transfer of patients to hospitals had been voiced repeatedly over the years (a boat connection was finally granted by New Zealand and was delivered in 2016). The helicopters were purchased by Tokelau's own trust-fund generated by revenues from its fisheries zone, and ordered by two public servants. A former New Zealand Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Murray McCully, in 2017, reacted strongly to this exercise of Tokelau initiative, and ordered the suspension of the two public servants, one of whom was the head of the public service. The Ulu and the Tokelau political leadership denied that the public servants had acted on their orders. The two suspended public servants tried to get their case heard at the General *Fono* in Tokelau, but were denied pending investigation. The case was then heard in the High Court of New Zealand at the end of 2018. Some asked for a high court hearing to be held in Tokelau, but New Zealand's Chief Justice Dame Sian Elias rejected this as impossible given the infrastructural demands.

This case demonstrated publicly the clear limits of Tokelau's independence (as permitted by New Zealand), and confirmed the dependence of the Tokelau state on NZ and UN aid. The timing of the hearing of the case in Wellington coincided with the eve of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's departure for her first visit to Tokelau. The verdict backed the New Zealand government's dismissal of the two public servants. Ardern's journey was the first visit of a New Zealand prime minister to Tokelau since the visit of Prime Minister Helen Clark in 2004. Significantly for Tokelau, the visit had a kinship-relational resonance to it, as Jacinda Ardern was accompanied on the journey by the Administrator of Tokelau, who happens to be her father, Ross Ardern. The administrator of Tokelau was a third defendant in the case brought by the two civil servants, for unlawful dismissal, until:

[...] in January his lawyers won a bid to strike him out. His predecessor, was ousted by Tokelau after disagreeing with the territory's leaders over a response to the incident. [...] New Zealand also drafted documents to take back some fiscal responsibility from Tokelau in response. (Smith 2019)

Subsequently, and in accordance with the Pacific Reset policy, the administrator R. Ardern has made repeated visits to Tokelau in order to repair New Zealand's relationship with what is described in the article as 'its sole Territory'. Publicly, 'independence' or self-governance (in the United Nations and New Zealand language and interpretation) by Tokelau was shown to have clear limits. The public image of dependency by the Tokelau state on NZ and UN aid was further confirmed by this case. The helicopter purchase was cancelled. In response, Tokelau report that they are currently planning for an airstrip site on the atolls (*cf.* RNZ 20.07.2019). On a laconic note, the Tokelau government observes that Tokelau has only ever had three visits by New Zealand prime ministers, and all from Labour governments [see also Government of Tokelau 2019]).

From the above scenarios we can see how, even in periods of Labour government, the strategic value of relationships to Polynesia and hence New Zealand's interest in strengthening or maintaining ties with Tokelau, fluctuates with macro-political trends. The concern from Tokelau's side that New Zealand, with the referenda on self-government wanted to 'cut the cord' as they put it, seems to have been put to rest for a while. There are currently no new time-specific plans for another referendum. How the mutual relationship meanwhile is 'cared for' is however an open question. In the wake of the debates concerning the case

of the helicopter purchase, a recurrent, but increasingly powerful concern emerged both locally but also internationally, regarding local political leaders and public servants who handle Tokelau's now considerable financial resources. The Tokelau International Trust Fund was established in November 2004 so as to provide an independent source of income to Tokelau and to future generations. Its balance in 2018 was 90.3 million NZ dollars, and consisted of revenue from its fisheries zone. The handling of the fishing quota and royalties is, importantly, the responsibility of New Zealand. Amongst the issues that were brought to public attention, and which culminated in the legal case in the High Court of New Zealand, are the following: Who controls Tokelau's politicians, and Tokelau's finances? Are the village councils who work in tandem with the national assembly still important decision making bodies? Or are public servants in danger of acting independently, as the intervention to the Modern House project seemed to indicate? Or, as the New Zealand intervention in the helicopter case seemed to indicate, is it ultimately the New Zealand Administration who governs Tokelau's internal affairs?

In the lead up to the two referenda, the delegation of New Zealand's judicial powers to the Tokelau political institutions was seen by many Tokelauans as a push for independence, motivated by a wish from New Zealand to cut the cord. This time, the New Zealand Administrators' intervention was taken by many to signal that New Zealand had revoked parts of its delegated powers. The existence of the cord was in other words confirmed in the eyes of Tokelau, only this time it was New Zealand who wanted the tie to be stronger.

#### TOKELAU CONCEPTIONS OF DEPENDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

In order to throw light on some of the issues raised concerning different ways of practicing relationships, we shall look at how underlying conceptions and values are expressed through local forms of sociality. In the Tokelau communities, the atoll villages and in the New Zealand diaspora, it is important to note that underlying the tensions that occasionally surface between the Tokelau Public Service and its political leaders is the seemingly ever-increasing gap between salaried and non-salaried workers. Government workers, that is, those with a higher education than the village work force (so-called unskilled labor) have access to monetary wealth that was not present in the villages at the time of the 1976 UN visit. Put simply, those with a higher education in New Zealand and in Tokelau have access to attractive jobs in the Tokelau public service (formerly run by the New Zealand States Services Commission). Those who have little education, and who until the mid-1970s comprised almost the entirety of the village workforce, now find themselves without this access to regular income. They frequently migrate to New Zealand, Australia and the US, where many become dependent on social services in addition to their access to seasonal work. However, and of significance for the events described in the previous section, this group also make up a substantial proportion of the village political leaders. The male family heads who have a seat in the village councils (*taupulega*), have since the transformation of the Modern House project been the political leaders of the public service, which is staffed mainly by Tokelauans or other nationals with a higher education gained overseas.

Tokelau interpretations of the concepts of independence and dependence differ in valuation from that of many English-speaking New Zealanders. To put it in broad terms, in the New Zealand frame of reference, independence has a positive value. It signals individual achievement and is associated with the maturation of Tokelau's political status, as envisioned to be the political goal of self-government. From the Tokelau perspective however, independence holds a largely negative value, as it signals individual immoral, uncontrolled behavior, and if applied to a collective, it signifies a group or entity that wants to

stand alone (*tu noa*) and above others (*fiahili*). The term *tu noa*, which literally means to stand alone, without support is associated with solitary confinement, which is used as punishment for those infringing on laws, and so has very negative connotations. *Fiahili*, carries connotations of being a ‘snob’, one who ‘thinks highly of oneself’, in short, it demonstrates anti-social behavior (see Bratrud on *haetinging* in Vanuatu, this volume).

The same duality and difference of interpretation also holds for the term ‘dependence’. In the New Zealand frame dependence is largely perceived as negative. In Hooper’s 1982 paper “Aid and Dependency in a small Pacific territory” he describes how Tokelau moved from a poor, but largely self-sufficient subsistence economy in the late 1970s to a predominantly aid-driven financial economy in a short period of time. In the eyes of some New Zealand tax-payers, as in many other countries in the world, dependence on aid is seen to encourage passive consumption of modern material goods, and the aid-receivers are depicted as sponging off the state; of failing to grow up and achieve adult status. In Tokelau terms however, to be dependent is for the most part viewed in a positive light. As epitomized by the self-denigrating term *tamamanu* (‘little bird, orphan, widowed person’), we see associations of dependency with humble or low status. To communicate low status, to pursue a strategy of self-lowering, is as Stasch (2009) also notes, a way of *equalizing status*. In Tokelau, the share system or *inati*, is precisely honed to ensure that all receive an equal share of collectively owned resources. However, a *tamamanu*, with little or no means of support does require help from others, and can be experienced as a drain on limited resources. Historically, Tokelau has for example refused to host resident priests for a period, with the explanation that they could not afford to support them. In general, the fact that people on occasion are in need of support is expected and it is socially acceptable to express such need for support (see also R. Stasch, this volume). Moreover, and of significance for our discussion, this term is frequently used by Tokelauans about themselves and in their political appeals to New Zealand and other aid-donors and counterparts, where they use this kind of self-lowering in order to elicit sympathy and support (Hoëm 1999, 2015b).

When explaining local ways of leadership, the two terms *pule*, that is, to command and *uhitaki*, to obey are central. These relational terms signify proper respect (*ava*), and an awareness of social status and relationality (*tulaga*), and expresses a concern with properly executed duties and obligations. When all relationships work together in a well-governed, well-orchestrated whole, (*maopoo*), people’s well-being and sustenance is assured by local leadership (Hoëm 1999, 2015a, 2015b). However, tensions between the security net provided by the system of distribution to all from collectively owned resources such as fish and produce (*i.e.* the *inati*-system) and wage-dependent monetary independence is becoming markedly noticeable. The tensions between the forces of dependence and independence, in local as well as outsider terms, are becoming increasingly difficult to contain for many Tokelauans.

#### WHAT IS AT STAKE: SHARING OR STANDING ALONE?

Hooper was visionary in criticizing the growing aid-driven monetary sphere that was producing relations of dependency between Tokelau and overseas aid-donors. At the time the Tokelau economy, though resource poor - with the important exception of seafood - and vulnerable to natural disasters, was still largely self-sufficient and mainly subsistence oriented. The incentives that from the mid-1970s were allocated towards developing the new administration and a local monetary economy were, according to Hooper not conducive to maintaining locally sustainable production. At present, in contemporary atoll societies, a gradual shift from subsistence-driven to a monetary economy has resulted in unprecedented

material growth. This shift has also been the main force behind the increasing in and out migration. Significantly, it has been accompanied by a gradual integration of the institutions of Tokelau's political governance with overseas counterparts such as those of New Zealand and the UN, but also with regional organizations such as the Pacific Forum. It is reasonable to link this development of the establishment of a dominant monetary economy and a concomitant increasing social inequality, to the massive resources poured into the push (from the UN and New Zealand, since 1976) towards Tokelau self-determination.

An important social fact, however, cuts across the more recent economically divisive realities. All Tokelau leaders depend on the support of their followers. Members of any social grouping, either in the village councils or in the work environment of the Tokelau Public Service need the support of others. For a person to be able to carry out his or her duty, in order to be able to command (*pule*) depends on other people voluntarily offering their support. Importantly, all individuals have some degree of choice when it comes to their allegiance to a particular political leader and group. To submit oneself to the powers of a leader or a group, does not necessarily imply a permanent engagement. A potential leader will always have to work hard to deserve the followers or dependents whose allegiance he or she commands (see also Martin 2013).

In sum, the local system of distribution generates a large degree of economic equality, but through relationships that are hierarchical – that is, a pattern where the elder, or the person of highest status commands (*pule*) and the younger or the one of lower status obeys, carries out the task (*uhitaki*). The system of distribution of resources and organization of tasks within the extended families is, according to the earlier analyses of Tokelau kinship by Huntsman (1971), based on what is seen as a complementary relationship between sisters and brothers.

The trans-national relationships encouraged by development aid, are not supposed to foster or support these kinds of relationships, neither hierarchical nor complementary, but are intended to produce greater (individual and national) freedom from what in policy documents comes across as an oppressive system. However, a striking feature throughout has been a marked absence in Tokelau of the 'yearning for independence' that according to the thinking of the decolonizing lobby was a driving force for decolonization in some African countries (see Ferguson 2013). This is related to the fact that the dependency that Hooper (or Wallerstein) warned against is obviously a very different kind of dependence than that valued by Tokelauans, as it is associated with relationships that are individualized, producing segmentation, or class-like societal structures, and is premised on the possibility of material accumulation (Hoëm 2018).

It is important to note that to evoke links with Pacific neighbors is not the same as to practice relationships in the same way as Tokelau elicits and encourages when it presents itself respectfully in a low position vis-à-vis the 'high' New Zealand, that is, as the *tamamanu* in need of nourishing support.

From the current perspective of state-building, this local system of regulation of productive and reproductive activities is to an ever-increasing degree rendered invisible by the dominance of the aid financed labor regime. This is particularly evident in administrative reports and outsiders' analyses of them, where dominant concerns include avoiding kin-bias in hiring processes, and favoritism based on family relationships (Hoëm 2004). Most importantly, the value of the fish and the fishing quotas that actually constitute Tokelau's great wealth is rendered invisible in this discourse. The considerable marine resources belonging to Tokelau are of increasing importance to the world at large.

In light of this outside criticism of the local close association between goods and relationships, and in particular the practice of eliciting goods and support through self-lowering, an important question remains. That is the issue of how this way of practicing relationships

is tied to local systems of resource distribution in general, and to gift giving in particular. Our common anthropological model of alienable and inalienable possession (Weiner 1992) in a certain sense disposes us to see value as inherent in the object and as intimately tied to certain forms of exchange. On applying the model of alienable/inalienable wealth to Polynesia, qualitatively different distinctions between kinds of things; kinds of actions (as different forms of social control); and kinds of relationships are too easily conflated. If we instead focus more broadly on including other forms of action whereby value (in the broader cultural sense, such as for example *alofa* pointing to 'love/generosity') is generated and performed we are better equipped to understand economic processes and the relationships (of social equality or hierarchy) that mediate and are produced by them.

In Tokelau we find commodities that may turn into valued possessions through being used as gifts; consumption employed as ways of creating wealth; inalienable objects that find their way onto the market *etc.* All these are examples of economic behavior found elsewhere in the world. The underlying locally significant distinction is of kinds of action: that is, things and relationships that are possible to control and things and relationships that are uncontrollable. In other words, it is a matter of placing importance on, distinguishing between, and cultivating qualitatively different kinds of relationships. Ultimately it amounts to a question of how social control is exercised, or how different social relations are valued.

Huntsman (1971) has described the salient Tokelauan relationship distinctions as similar and complementary. These two dimensions cut across the common classifications of kin, age and gender. Similar relationships exist between two individuals or groups of equal status (for example between two brothers, or two sports teams), and the interaction between them are typically competitive. Complementary relationships exist between two individuals or groups of different or unequal status (for example between brothers and sisters, or between elders and youth), and interaction between them is characterized by command (*pule*), deference (*uhitaki*) and cooperation (*maopoopo*).

I have added to this analysis, by showing why so-called similar relationships tend to be competitive, and why complementary relationships establish cooperation by forming a unit characterized by dominance and submission (see Hoëm 1999, 2015a). To put it simply, for any kind of relationship, it is a matter of establishing which pattern of action to follow for interaction to be possible. However, and even when shifting the focus from 'kinds of objects' to 'kinds of action,' we remain within the realm of classification. Venturing into everyday life interaction, we find that in practice it is not always possible to predict which perspective on qualities of actions, relationships and objects will prevail. Tensions between conflicting or competing perspectives may emerge equally in formal or informal contexts (for examples see Hoëm 2004, Stasch 2009 and this volume). The two systems, modern administration and its code of conduct that advocates transparency and accountability for political leaders, and the kin-based sociality that operates on the principle of accessing resources through hierarchical relationships (chains of command, *pule*, and compliance/execution, *uhitaki*) are entangled on the ground, and so regularly produce conflicting situations. It is here that we may analyze such tensions of value. It is important to note that the village political institutions that are the political heads of the public service are also based on hierarchical relationships and the principle of complementarity. The village councils are run by family-representatives, either *matai* (titled family heads) or elders. The National Assembly or General Fono comprises, in addition to the elected male family heads, representatives from the National Women's Council of Tokelau, the Fatupaepae (a more recent institution grafted onto the Sanitation Committees of older times, by the suggestion of the UN). The line between public service and political leadership is not always clear: public servants are supposed to be the 'hands and feet' of the Village Councils (following the *pule*: *uhitaki* model), but recent events attest to it not always being the case.

Underlying all these questions are, as I have argued, two opposed interpretations of dependency informed by qualitatively different ways of practicing relationships. The significant issue for our discussion here is that the giving of gifts is a social action that may be elicited by requests, in certain situations, through the equalizing strategy of self-lowering. This practice of elicitation was discussed at length by Sahlins and Thomas in the *American Ethnologist*, where the issue of ‘eliciting’ goods could be seen as begging, or as Sahlins and Thomas argued, a strategy of extended reciprocity among kin and affiliates (Sahlins 1993b; Thomas 1993).

#### CONCLUSION: RELATIONSHIPS OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF DEPENDENCE AND POWER

It is important to note that the most important inalienable possession in Tokelau is land. There is not much evidence to suggest that land is an object of transaction (as opposed to a transfer between family members). With one known exception<sup>1</sup>, boundaries between kinds of objects that can be exchanged and those that should be kept may be challenged or even disregarded if a person (or a group) seizes the opportunity to be creative with transactions of objects that in the ordinary run of things should not be sold or elicited as gifts (Hoëm forthcoming). The most salient distinction in practice is the difference between things that should be cared for (for example mats and boats) and things that should be disregarded as of no importance (for example imported goods of no lasting cultural value, such as digital equipment).

The things that require care are, in theory those which serve or are controlled by collectives. The things that are of no importance, and which could (and often should) be let go, are those over which an individual has power. Significantly, the only real resource of monetary value to the world at large in Tokelau, is represented by the fisheries in the economic exclusive zone (*cf.* McCormack 2017, and this volume). The power to allow legitimate use of the revenue from this fisheries zone has become a contested issue, more so than that of who holds legislative power in cases of local conflict resolution. This was evidence in the case of alleged incest, and even more so by the outcomes of the two discussed referenda.

As we have seen, to be independent is to stand alone, without support, and those who were in favor of Tokelau self-determination were caught in this logic. In order to create conditions for Tokelau’s independence, an object serving as a visible token of a commitment to long-term relatedness (as for example a boat could have been) was needed from New Zealand’s side. However, the powerful binding force of certain kinds of objects, was not understood as significant in this relational sense by the political engineers of the Modern House of Tokelau.

New forms of travels or *malaga* have emerged over the last three decades, bringing new patterns of interaction and forms of engagement. Tokelau’s relationship with New Zealand includes New Zealand citizenship for its inhabitants. Members of the Tokelau diaspora had a wake-up call when they discovered to their dismay and surprise that they, as non-residents had indeed cut the cord to the home-land as they were barred from casting their votes in the two referenda. They argued that as atoll people they are heavily emotionally and financially invested in maintaining ties to Tokelau, despite their access to residency rights elsewhere. This has and will continue to influence their strategies for moving back to Tokelau or for staying overseas. Additionally, how they will continue the work to safeguard their land and ocean-resources is of critical importance. How the diaspora choose to maintain their relationships to the atolls is of importance for the people who reside there, and for the overseas communities. It is important that people in Tokelau get to decide over when

and who travels so as to visit or to stay. How New Zealand at large, that is, the population beyond the Pacific people, and its political leadership in the future will acknowledge the reciprocal character of its 'Polynesian' relationships remains to be seen. The equalizing strategy of gift giving, as practiced by Tokelau and as experienced by its visitors over the last three decades represents a good model of how such relationships can be those of care and acknowledgement, of mutual dependence in a positive sense.

## NOTE

1. In the known history of Tokelau there is one notable exception, involving a shady character called Eli Jennings, some land on Fenua Fala in Fakaofu, and the fourth atoll of Tokelau, Olohega, that as a result became alienated from Tokelau. Typically, such exceptions become legal matters.

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