

# Tuvaluan *Faatele*: A Performative and Historico-geographic Context\*

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The *faatele* performance begins as a hushed, almost purposefully subdued event. The *faatele* ensemble, a flattened wooden box and a biscuit tin surrounded by several dozen seated singers and three lines of dancers, is silent, and performers have their heads to the ground. A single voice begins the first stanza, and others immediately join in. A verse is sung, abruptly stops, then the three lines of dancers stand up. Slowly and gracefully at first, the colourfully adorned dancers move their upper bodies in a mimetic fashion, elucidating the text of the song. Quietly, and almost as if humbly introducing themselves, a group of seated men strikes the box with their open palms. The single biscuit-tin player softly strikes his tin with two wooden sticks.

The tempo begins to accelerate, slowly at first, but gains pace quickly. Now the mood is uplifted; white flashes of smiles dot the room. The volume increases several times over. The tempo is now three times faster than when the song started. Cheers erupt from the ensemble. The carefully scripted dance actions at first appear frenzied, but are as graceful as they were when slow. The box players are now striking their instrument as hard as they can, while the biscuit tin

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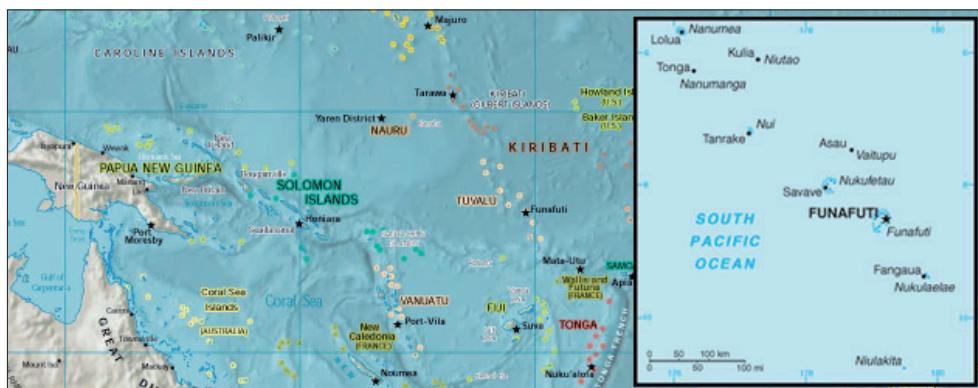
\* This article is based on over a year of fieldwork, five months of which were in Tuvalu. While in Tuvalu I directed a project, in collaboration with the Tuvaluan government, to record and document a group of vestigial genres of the pre-European musical idiom, collectively referred to as 'old songs'. This group of pre-European genres is rarely performed and is quite distinct from the widely practiced *faatele*. While in Tuvalu, however, I participated in all aspects Tuvaluan musical life as much as possible, including *faatele* performance. I also interviewed several prominent *faatele* composers in Tuvalu. Since 2008 I have been actively engaged with the New Zealand Tuvaluan community and have conducted over a dozen interviews with prominent Tuvaluan *faatele* composers in Auckland. I am grateful for the help of Daniele Rudischer in rendering Figures 4, 6, and 7.

is producing a fury of piercing metallic notes. The sound is almost deafening. A whistle is blown and the group enters into one final crescendo, a climax of sound that can be heard kilometres away. The singers, dancers and instrumentalists are bursting with excitement, unable to contain their ear-to-ear grins. All of a sudden the entire group stops, the dancers frozen in time. All is silent for several seconds. Then come raucous cheers of accomplishment and pride.

*Faatele*, a vocally and instrumentally accompanied dance from the nation of Tuvalu, is a synthesis of European and indigenous musical elements that emerged, in its present form, sometime after the introduction of Christianity to the islands in the late 1800s. *Faatele* is a musical tradition not unique to Tuvalu, but indisputably from Tuvalu. It is more than just a musical tradition; it is a symbol of what it means to be Tuvaluan.

Tuvalu is a small and isolated South Pacific atoll nation with a population of twelve thousand (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> It is located 8° South by 179° East, or roughly halfway between Australia and Hawaii. It was known as the Ellice Islands prior to independence from the United Kingdom in 1978. Archeological, genealogical, linguistic and historical evidence all suggest that Tuvalu was settled some eight hundred years ago by people of Samoan and, to a lesser extent, Tongan origin.<sup>2</sup> Thus Tuvaluan culture is, except for the island of Nui, Polynesian.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1.** Map of Oceania and Tuvalu. (CIA World Fact Book, [online resource] <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tv.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tv.html)>, accessed 13 May 2009).



Tuvalu is one of the lowest-lying nations on Earth. The highest point of land in the entire country is a mere five meters above sea level, leaving it vulnerable to the effects of climate change.<sup>4</sup> There has been some debate concerning the existence and scope of climate change. The effects of climate change in Tuvalu are not only real, but are increasingly severe, and there have been several scientific studies supporting this. Indeed, Church, White and Hunter observe

<sup>1</sup> The country consists of nine islands: the Northern islands of Nanumea, Nanumaga, and Niutao; the Central islands of Nui, Nukufetau, Vaitupu, and Funafuti; and the Southern islands of Nukulaelae and Niulakita.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Munro, 'The Lagoon Islands. A History of Tuvalu 1820–1908,' PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1982, 7.

<sup>3</sup> The inhabitants of Nui are culturally and linguistically Micronesian due to past conquests by the inhabitants of present day Kiribati.

<sup>4</sup> 'Tuvalu,' CIA World Fact Book, April 23 2009 [online resource], <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tv.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tv.html)>, accessed 13 May 2009.

a significant and accelerating rise in sea levels in the Tuvaluan capital, Funafuti.<sup>5</sup> They also state that 'reports of flooding are becoming increasingly common' in Tuvalu, and conclude that sea-level rise will cause 'serious problems' for the inhabitants of many low-lying Pacific islands in the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup> The idea, then, of Tuvalu slowly 'sinking' due to rising sea levels is no longer a hypothetical eventuality that may or may not occur, but is presently taking place.

The possible discourse on a yet-to-be-studied musical genre seems limitless.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is tempting to focus on one particular aspect of the *faatele*. Tempo acceleration, textual analysis, or an investigation of kinesics could easily be the topic of this article and do provide interesting avenues for future publication; yet I argue for a more general methodology rooted in description, textual analysis, a small amount of musical analysis, and a discussion of historical origins and dispersion. I have come to this conclusion for three reasons.

First, time is of the essence. Tuvalu's existence as a nation is under threat, as is Tuvaluan culture, and thus Tuvaluan music.<sup>8</sup> I want to distinguish the nature of my work, however, from the early to mid-twentieth-century ethnomusicologists who saw themselves as 'collectors,' rushing to capture and publish accounts of the last of a 'pure' music that was rapidly disappearing in the face of encroaching modernisation. Tuvalu is already modernised to some extent, and its music has long had many foreign influences, including that of the West. The urgent need to document the Tuvaluan *faatele* is in response to a physical threat, the result of which could completely erase the physical landscape upon which this musical tradition came into existence.

Second, the majority of informants that were interviewed, particularly those in diaspora communities,<sup>9</sup> have made it quite clear that they understand the value in documenting *faatele* and other Tuvaluan musical genres. In fact, informants, as well as other Tuvaluans with whom I have discussed my work, lament the fact that there has been very little written regarding Tuvaluan music. It therefore makes sense to write something that, while suitable for academic publication, is also accessible to thousands of second generation Tuvaluans who will wish to know more about their music. This is one of the main strategies of applied ethnomusicology and is what Sheehy describes as "feeding back" musical models to the communities that created them.<sup>10</sup>

Third, *faatele* is not unique to Tuvalu, neither by name nor idiomatic structure, as it is also found in the neighbouring islands of Tokelau, Kiribati, Wallis, Futuna and Rotuma. Interestingly, both academics and non-Tuvaluan informants acknowledge Tuvalu as the place of origin for this widely dispersed musical phenomenon;<sup>11</sup> yet, despite the existence of a relatively large

<sup>5</sup> J.A. Church, N. J. White, and J. R. Hunter, 'Sea-level Rise at Tropical Pacific and Indian Ocean Islands,' *Global and Planetary Change* 53.3 (2006): 155–68.

<sup>6</sup> Church, White and Hunter, 'Sea-level Rise' 166.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Elizabeth Lawson, a Kiribati music researcher, wrote two articles in the 1980s and 1990s that discuss Tuvaluan *faatele*. At the time of writing, these articles are unpublished and could not be located.

<sup>8</sup> Although Tuvaluan culture *in situ* is in danger of disappearing, I have no doubt that Tuvaluan music and culture will live in the constantly growing diaspora, mostly in New Zealand, but also in Australia, Fiji, Samoa, and the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Though migration and travel have long been a part of Tuvaluan life, in the last ten years, there has been a massive migration of Tuvaluans to other countries, mostly New Zealand. While the diaspora community in Auckland is particularly large and active, there are also small communities as far afield as the UK, France and Canada.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Sheehy, 'A Few Notions about Philosophy and Strategy in Applied Ethnomusicology,' *Ethnomusicology* 36.3 (1992): 330–31.

<sup>11</sup> As, for example, in a personal communication from the Bryden family, 3 Feb. 2009.

body of scholarly work on various other *faatele* and *faatele*-like genres, Tuvaluan *faatele* has not been the topic of a serious academic study. Thus, a discussion of *faatele*'s Tuvaluan origins and distribution make for valuable additions to the continuing academic discourse of *faatele* dispersion throughout the Pacific.

Given the nature of the above discussion, this article is structured into four sections. First I will describe *faatele*'s performative structure. Second, I will examine the genre's textual content. Third, I will discuss *faatele*'s musical content. Finally, I will examine its Tuvaluan origins and dispersion in the South Pacific.

*Faatele* is one of several genres of music presently practised in Tuvalu.<sup>12</sup> It is the newest Tuvaluan dance genre, and utilises both indigenous and European musical idioms. *Faatele* almost always takes place in public meeting houses known as *maneapa* or *fale kaupule*. Involving anywhere between a dozen and a hundred participants, *faatele* is a celebratory dance, and its most basic function, obvious to any observer, is to raise the spirits of the participants. Perhaps most importantly, *faatele* is considered Tuvalu's most cherished musical tradition, and is associated with island-specific and national pride.

*Faatele* distinguishes itself amongst Tuvaluan musical genres by its existence as a complex performance genre; a single event, the performance, is a culmination of planning, composition and rehearsals. Consisting of short melodic and textual phrases that accelerate in tempo, single songs are not long (about four or five minutes), but a single performance of many songs may last an hour, an afternoon, an evening, or all night, into the morning. The ensemble, comprised of singers, dancers, box players, tin player and conductor, forms the basis of this relatively complex performative structure.

Seated around the box, the singers form the bulk of the *faatele* ensemble. There are three vocal parts sung in the *faatele*: the *pulotu* (lead male singer), *leo fafine* (women) and *maluu* (the bass). The *pulotu* and the 'best [male] singers' sit in the middle of the group,<sup>13</sup> near the box, and often play the box concurrently. The *leo fafine* sit around this inner core of singers. Around the *leo fafine*, the *maluu* form the outer circle of the *faatele*. The *pulotu* does not always have an individual part, but can sing along with the male chorus.

The box (*posiki* or *pusa*) is the core of the *faatele* ensemble and provides a stable pulse, from which the other members of the group take cues. The *pusa* is a hollow, three-sided box, usually made of wooden planks and covered with woven mats (see Figure 2). Its dimensions are approximately 0.75m x 1.5m. It is struck simultaneously with one or two hands by several players,<sup>14</sup> often quite forcefully, and produces a very deep, resonant sound. The origins of the box are obscure. Some say it is an evolution of the pounded mats used in some of the 'old songs';<sup>15</sup> however, as will be discussed further below, one religious myth from Nanumaga describes the box being used in 'the dark ages,' suggesting an even earlier origin.

<sup>12</sup> Though the scope of this article does not permit an in-depth discussion of Tuvaluan music as a whole, it should be noted that there are four main genres of music in Tuvalu: *faatele*, church hymns, vocally accompanied string bands and 'old songs'.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication, Taumaia Tapumania, 11 Oct. 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The box is played with two hands on all the islands of Tuvalu except Funafuti, where it is played with one hand only.

<sup>15</sup> In older Tuvaluan musical genres, in place of the box, mats were rolled or folded up and pounded, producing percussive sound. This practice is still found in *faatele* on Niutao.

**Figure 2.** The box and box players during a performance (photo By Marc Beaulieu)



If the box is the core of the *faatele* ensemble, then the biscuit tin (*kaapa*) is the driving force of the group. The tin is approximately 30cm x 60cm long, and is made of aluminum (see Figure 3). The biscuit tin is common in Tuvalu as a utilitarian item, as Tuvaluans enjoy biscuits, accompanied by tea. The tin was incorporated into the *faatele* ensemble soon after it was introduced, which was said to be several years before World War Two. Before the introduction of the tin, the *paate* and *papa* (both wooden idiophones that are now rarely used) fulfilled the role of the tin in most Tuvaluan dance, including *faatele*.

**Figure 3.** A tin and tin player during a performance (photo by Marc Beaulieu)



To play the tin, a designated person (*taufi kaapa*) balances the tin with one corner on the ground, in order for it to be as resonant as possible. The tin player (*taa kaapa*) then strikes the tin with carved cocos palm wood sticks (*kau ta*). The tin player is usually a young man,<sup>16</sup> and is chosen by the conductor from a pool of young, aspiring tin players. He / she is usually free to improvise

<sup>16</sup> Female *kaapa* players are found only on the island of Nui.

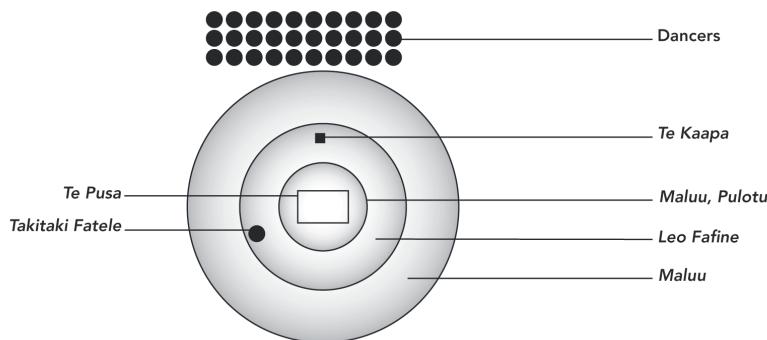
his/her manner of playing as he/she pleases, but 'has to follow the tune of the song.'<sup>17</sup> I would qualify this statement by adding that a preliminary analysis of *kaapa* rhythms does show that particular musical paradigms are followed, despite a certain allowance for improvisation.

The whistle (*piila*) is a metal pea-whistle, presumably imported. It is used only by the conductor and functions as a signaling device. The whistle is blown a maximum of four times during a song. The first whistle is blown after the first verse, before the dancers stand up. The second whistle signals the dancers to begin dancing. The third signals that the final verse is commencing. The fourth and final whistle signals the dancers to stop and hold whatever dance pose they are in, wait three seconds, then stop.

The conductor or ensemble leader (*taki taki faatele*) is the director of the *faatele* ensemble. Aside from 'women's days' or women's community events where women form their own *faatele* ensemble, the conductor is always male. The conductor not only controls the tempo and dynamics, but often also composes the melody, text and actions of the *faatele*. According to one prominent Tuvaluan conductor, the prerequisites for someone to become an ensemble leader are proficiency in singing, dancing and playing the box and tin. The *taki taki faatele* is also generally witty, exuberant, animated, humorous, and a good speech-maker. He is somewhat of a clown, making humorous speeches before and after a *faatele*, and displaying exaggerated body movements during a performance. Although the elders of the community may have some say in the organisation and repertoire of a *faatele* performance, the *taki taki faatele* has the final word. The *taki taki faatele* chooses the *kaapa* (tin) player based on his skill. He also acts as a coach, correcting what he sees as mistakes, such as the box players playing too quickly, the *kaapa* player playing too loudly, or the *pulotu* singing too quickly. It should be noted that the *taki taki faatele* is not always part of the *faatele* ensemble in the Northern islands of Nanumea, Nanumaga, and Niutao where decisions regarding performance are made communally.

The seated ensemble has a standardised formation, which, in the dozens of *faatele* performances I have observed, never changes (see Figure 4). The singers always form a circle around the box. The *kaapa* player sits between the box and the dancers in order to see them both, while maintaining a constant rhythm. The conductor, unlike the rest of the chorus, stands during a performance. He can and does move around the group frequently, correcting the pitch of a group of singers, or the rhythm of the *kaapa*. However, the ideal place for the conductor

**Figure 4.** Lined dancers and typical seated chorus



<sup>17</sup> Personal communication, Taumaia Tapumanaia, 11 Oct. 2008.

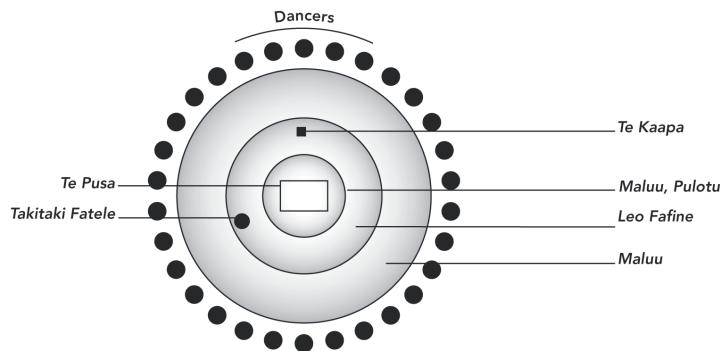
is between the box and the dancers, as from there he can observe both the box and the *kaapa*. This formation of the seated chorus rarely changes.

**Figure 5.** A line of female dancers (photo by Marc Beaulieu)



Dance in *faatele* is highly reflective of the typical Polynesian dance idiom. Like most Polynesian dance, dance in *faatele* 'is no different from song, but adds one extra expressive dimension to the utterance of word, the song poetry.'<sup>18</sup> Diversity in the ensemble formation occurs in dancer positioning. The first and most common formation is in lines (see Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> Another less common formation occurs when the dancers form a circle around the group. This formation is found mostly in the Northern islands (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Circular faatele dance formation

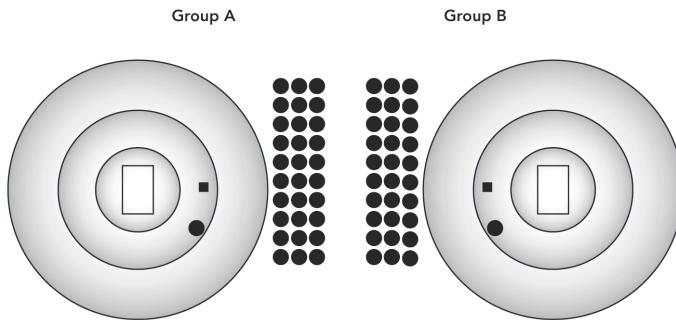


In a competition, two lines of dancers face each other (see Figure 7).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Richard Moyle, *Polynesian Music and Dance* (Auckland: Centre for Pacific Studies, 1991) 51.

<sup>19</sup> Depending on the size of the ensemble, there can be anywhere from one to four lines of anywhere between six and a dozen dancers.

<sup>20</sup> Like many genres of Polynesian dance, two groups may perform at the same event and engage in competition. There are no clear winners or losers in this type of performance, and its purpose is to create a friendly sense of rivalry, which naturally makes for a more lively performance. Competition formation may also be inverted, with dancers on opposite sides of the seated choruses, though the dancers are still *vis-à-vis*.

**Figure 7.** Faatele Competition Formation

Though gender-specific dance ensembles exist, mixed ensembles are the norm, with males and females usually performing together in separate lines. Males and females always perform identical actions. Synchronicity of dance, although ideal, is not always perfect. *Faatele* dance is also typical of Polynesian dance in that it 'emphasise[s] kinetic synchronicity.'<sup>21</sup> *Faatele* dancers primarily utilise their upper bodies, which is also typical of Polynesian dance.<sup>22</sup> For large events, a performance is rehearsed several times, giving the dance a more uniform appearance. However, impromptu, unrehearsed, or under-rehearsed *faatele* can occur, during which time dance uniformity is not expected, and mistakes can be found humorous.

*Faatele* has two basic dance styles. In the first, the actions are mimetic of the text; when the word 'heart' is sung, for example, the corresponding action is to point to one's heart. This style of dancing is referred to as *tui ki te pati*. The second style of dance, *tui ki te lao*, accompanies the rhythm of the melody, and the actions have no symbolic meaning. A single song can be entirely in one dance style, or can be a combination of both. Dance movements in both styles do not occupy a large amount of space: the actions themselves are usually quite close to the body, and the dancers are close together. Dancers almost always dance as themselves, that is, they do not usually portray animals, supernatural beings, or other people. However, I observed one *faatele* where the dancers portrayed American soldiers during an event to commemorate the bombing of Funafuti during World War Two.

When placing degrees of importance on different components of the *faatele*, it cannot be overstated that the text of *faatele* is paramount; in other words, when comparing *faatele* text, music, and dance, the importance of the text overrides, and in many cases determines, the music and dance of *faatele*. This is typical of Polynesian music.

A Tuvaluan *faatele* text is brief, with most songs consisting of only a single, repeating verse. Allan Thomas describes the related Tokelauan *fātele* as 'haiku-like'; the same can be said of Tuvaluan *faatele*.<sup>23</sup> Though the text is quite short, it is full of meaning and metaphor, and in many circumstances, can only be understood within a specific temporal and locational context.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Moyle, *Polynesian Music* 51.

<sup>22</sup> Moyle, *Polynesian Music* 52.

<sup>23</sup> Allan Thomas, *New Song and Dance in the Central Pacific: Creating and Performing the Fātele of Tokelau* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1996) 48.

<sup>24</sup> Though *faatele* are usually performed in their intended context (for example, an island-specific holiday), some songs have become 'old favourites' and are well known throughout Tuvalu. These *faatele* can be performed on any occasion, but most commonly occur during impromptu performances, as participants can perform the item unrehearsed.

The subjects of *faatele* texts seem almost limitless: subjects can range from people to shoes, guns, love, or even numbers. However, these diverse subjects are grouped into distinct 'themes' (*pogai*).<sup>25</sup>

Though classified by Tuvaluans as 'theme,' one group of *faatele* texts can also be defined as event-based texts, meaning they are composed with specific events in mind and refer to a particular topic. 'Events' can be religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter, or island specific days, such as Nukufetau Youth Day. The second theme is that of place (land and sea). This strong connection to the land and sea is frequently reflected in the text of *faatele*, as, for example, in 'Tulaki Tautai O Tutasi' (translation by Asita Molotii and Alamai Sioni):

<i>Tulaki tautai o Tutasi</i>	Leaders of Tutasi
<i>Ko ia ko te saeala</i>	Fished out of the school of fish
<i>E sisi i loto ite manu ote vasa</i>	Compete for the glory of the island
<i>Akasaki a fenua e solo</i>	They are our future

The first line refers to the brightest students of Tutasi, Tuvalu's first school. The second line provides a good example of how metaphor is utilised in Tuvaluan *faatele* text. 'Fished out of the school of fish' is a poetic device that creates an allegory between choosing the brightest of the Nukufetau youth and fishing (perhaps harpooning) the best of a school of fish. The third and fourth lines are words of encouragement for the youth; the verse also acts as a reminder to the adults that the future of the island depends on the education of the youth.

'Tulaki Tautai O Tutasi' is a good demonstration of mixed themes, which are often found. First, the event theme is the education of youth, as this *faatele* is a composition specifically for Nukufetau Youth Day. Second, the themes of land and sea are apparent in the references to 'the island' (Nukufetau), and fishing from the sea.

The third theme found in *faatele* is Christianity, particularly Biblical events. God and Jesus are sometimes directly praised, but it is more common to find references to Biblical tales as in 'Bon Akea Riki' (translation by William Bryden):<sup>26</sup>

<i>Bon akea riki, iaon Tamton</i>	There is no one else as strong as Samson
<i>E kaitiki boua</i>	He pulled down the post
<i>Te mwaneaba (x2)</i>	Down in the <i>maneapa</i> (x2)
<i>Aa aa aa a mate (x2)</i>	Temple (x2)
<i>Ti a bora ni mate bwa akea</i>	They all died
<i>Ae kabaea Tamton</i>	Oh the pain of dying because no one tied up Samson

This *faatele* depicts the Biblical story of Samson. This text is typical of *faatele* because it offers a compressed version of this Biblical tale, which, to someone unfamiliar with the Bible, is meaningless, but to any Tuvaluan, immediately conjures up images of Samson, endowed with super-human strength.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication, Taumaia Tapumania, 11 Oct. 2008.

<sup>26</sup> This *faatele* text is from a performance by the Nui community of Funafuti, commemorating a catastrophic flood that occurred on Nui in the late 1800s. Though politically part of Tuvalu, Nui is culturally Micronesian and its inhabitants speak the Kiribati language. *Faatele*, however, is just as common on Nui. It is also interesting to note that this particular song is common throughout Kiribati.

The final category of thematic device employed in *faatele* is the love song.<sup>27</sup> This theme is rarely used, but a composer will occasionally write a love song for his wife.

Musically, *faatele* is a syncretic genre, both melodically and rhythmically, though indigenous elements are more prominent in the rhythmic structure and European elements more prominent in the melodic structure. The melody (*fati*), rather than determining the textual content of *faatele*, complements it. Like the text, *faatele* melodies are short, repeated phrases with, as shown in Figure 8, repeated call and response lines. All of the composers interviewed thus far compose the *fati* before the text. This process is not typical of Polynesian composition, where the text is usually composed first, followed by the melody and dance.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps melody plays a more prominent role in *faatele* than is typical in Polynesian music. Indeed, this notion is supported by the proposition of one composer that the purpose of the melody is to 'capture the feeling of the people' and that listeners of a good melody can 'feel it as soon as they hear it.'<sup>29</sup> Melodic brevity ties into the notion of inclusivity in the *faatele* ensemble; that is to say that learning a *faatele* melody does not require a significant amount of training, thus anyone can feel free to join in the singing and learn on the spot.

**Figure 8.** First line of 'Muamua O Siki.' (Firstly, we want to thank God for His loving ways)

Leo Fafine

Leo Fafine

Maluu and Puluotu

te-na a - lo fa

te-na a - lo fa

Mu-a - mu-a o si - ki a-tu e fa-ka - fe-ta - i

Christensen describes *faatele* as 'sung to European melodies'.<sup>30</sup> I would qualify this statement by proposing that *faatele* melody, though predominantly of the European musical idiom, does have indigenous characteristics. Diatonicism and European harmony can clearly be seen in Figure 8. However, the responsorial pattern of the male chorus thanking God, and the female chorus responding with 'his loving ways' is consistent with what Christensen describes as antiphonal singing<sup>31</sup> and is a defining characteristic of several older Tuvaluan musical genres.

Rhythmic structure in *faatele* can be described as a triple-layered strata of complexity. The box is the foundation of these rhythmic strata and acts as the steady pulse, sometimes abruptly doubling in rhythmic density in order to create excitement. The box and its rhythmic structure is clearly an indigenous musical idiom, descending from the pounded mats of older Tuvaluan music. The second layer of the strata is the seated chorus, which provides a middle ground of rhythmic complexity. Syncopation and complex rhythms are not common in the chorus; this is perhaps due to *faatele*'s nineteenth-century hymn influence, which eschews complex rhythms. The third and most complex rhythm of these strata is the tin. Full of triplets, syncopation, and

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, Taumaia Tapumanaia, 11 Oct. 2008.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 73.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, Taumaia Tapumanaia, 11 Oct. 2008.

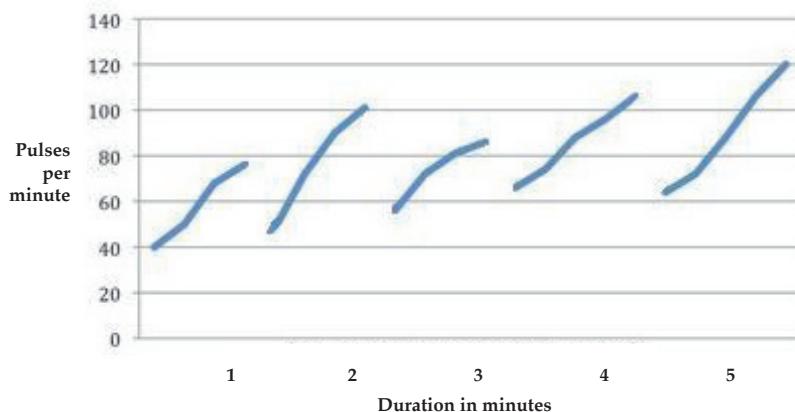
<sup>30</sup> Dieter Christensen and Gerd Koch, *Die Musik der Ellice-Inseln* (Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde, 1964) 17. Christensen gives an extensive musical analysis of old Tuvaluan music, but says little about *faatele*.

<sup>31</sup> Christensen and Koch, *Die Musik* 172.

rhythmic accents, the tin gives the ensemble a sense of forward motion and pace. The tin and its rhythmic structure clearly descends from the *paate* and *papa* used in older Tuvaluan music.

Perhaps the defining musical characteristic of *faatele* is its increase in tempo. Each *faatele*, no matter which island it is from or which dance formation it uses, employs the use of accelerating tempo. Its function is simple: to create excitement. There are two types of tempo acceleration. The first is by far the most common and can be described as ‘peaks and canyons’ with an increasing tempo gradient (see Figure 9). Another less common type of tempo acceleration, with a steadily increasing gradient, occurs mostly on the southern islands.

**Figure 9.** Tempo Acceleration in ‘Muamua O Siki.’ The Y-axis represents pulses per minute, while the X-axis denotes time elapsed. The lines represent sections of tempo acceleration. The ‘breaks’ between the lines represent the absence of singing.



The example represented in Figure 9 contains five distinct sections of tempo acceleration. In the first, the ensemble usually sings three repetitions of the first verse, and then abruptly stops on the conductor’s cue. The ensemble and audience cheer for fifteen seconds (cheering generally lasts for between ten and twenty seconds). The section is then repeated, but begins and ends at a slightly higher tempo. The remaining three sections are almost musically identical to sections one and two, but contain the second verse of text.

For musical genres of historically non-literate societies, the question of origins is a difficult one. Ruth Stone states that ‘[c]hronology may have little significance in some cultures and provide[s] an explanation that has little relevance to the people in a particular society.’<sup>32</sup> This tenet holds true with regard to *faatele*. There is no single historical account that is widely known. Nor does the history of the *faatele* seem to be of great importance to Tuvaluans. Yet there are accounts of origin, several of which appear to offer conflicting views of where and when *faatele* originated. Christensen and Koch suggest that it may have evolved from a seated dance that has been described as *fati*.<sup>33</sup> Another explanation of origin lies in myth:

A long time ago, the Nanumagan people had no entertainment. But one evening, some people of the island were sleeping on the beach, when suddenly they heard the sound of strangers singing from a distant place on the island. The people asked the brave men

<sup>32</sup> Ruth Stone, *Theory for Ethnomusicology* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008) 180.

<sup>33</sup> Christensen and Koch, *Die Musik* 188.

to go and see what this noise was. The men followed the noise, and they discovered that people they had never seen before were sitting together, playing *faatele*. The brave men practised to bring this noise back to the people of Nanumaga. They tried to figure out who they were, but could not find out. While the brave men were still peeping, suddenly the group of dancers vanished. The brave men returned back and told the people what they had seen, and what they had learned. Three days after, Nanumagans practiced *faatele*. From that time, they only used two hands for singing and beating the box while performing the *faatele*. Nanumagan people knew that *faatele* was [a] special gift from the gods.<sup>34</sup>

Accounts of musical change also lie in myth:

One day in the dark ages, a man named Kaka went to cut toddy in the bush (Haapihu). While he was on top of his last toddy tree, he heard a sound of a box and singing nearby him. He looked for the noise and he saw a group of gods in the lagoon (HaaTelua), dancing around the box. Kaka saw six men sitting with the box in the middle of the dancers, and they used two hands to beat the box with. Kaka kept on watching, for twenty minutes, until the gods disappeared. When Kaka went home, he didn't tell anybody about this, but he tried to practise to beat the mat with his two hands like how the fairies did. Kaka went and saw this group of gods for three days at the same place, and on the third day, he returned to the village and told all the people what he had seen at Haapihu/HaaTelua lagoon. The Nanumagan people asked Kaka to teach them how to beat the box with two hands, so Kaka taught them, and they learned to beat the box nicely, and with excitement. So, Nanumagan people are known throughout Tuvalu and the world for their use of the box. Without Kaka and the gods, the Nanumagan people would not have any entertainment.<sup>35</sup>

Yet another account attributes the invention of *faatele* to one man on Funafuti, sometime in the early twentieth century:

He saw these people using the *fakaseasea*, the Funafuti people ... but the *fakaseasea* is all one sort of tune and the actions are up to the individual. So he sat down and he tried to compose more *fakaseasea* in his own way of doing it. Then instead of doing the same tune and same individual action he tried to do different tunes to each song and he tried to have the actions go with the wording, so there was meaning to the actions.<sup>36</sup>

Stone justly articulates, with relation to historical research in ethnomusicology, that 'we can not interrogate the dead, so to speak.'<sup>37</sup> Thus these stories of the historical origins of *faatele* are not empirical, but informative with regard to its contemporary status. It should be noted that these accounts of *faatele* are all equally valid, and although they offer differing explanations of origins, they all regard *faatele* as being from Tuvalu. Indeed, Thomas also acknowledges Tuvalu as the likely epicenter of the spread of various dances similar to *faatele*, or known as

<sup>34</sup> Personal communication, Paka Simona, 14 Apr. 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Personal communication, Paka Simona, 14 Apr. 2006

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, Talikitili Tapumania, 11 October 2008.

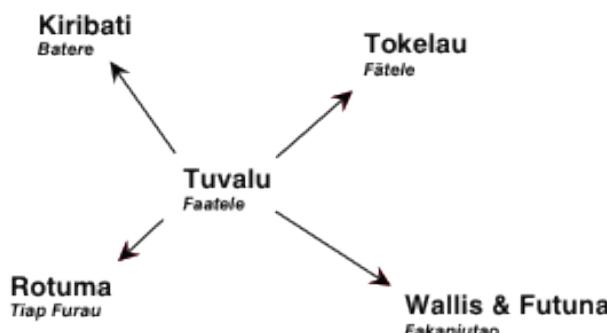
<sup>37</sup> Stone, *Theory for Ethnomusicology* 186.

*faatele*, in the Central Pacific.<sup>38</sup> This notion of *faatele* as an indigenous invention is the major common element in these three narratives; it is also the most important. I would suggest that this belief that *faatele* is a uniquely Tuvaluan creation suggests a strong connection between *faatele* and national identity.

Although the origins of *faatele* may be difficult to discern, it is clear that *faatele*, by name and by similar idiomatic structure, is found throughout the central and western Pacific. In Alan Thomas's comprehensive book on Tokelauan *fātele*, an entire chapter is devoted to *faatele* distribution in the South Pacific (see figure 10). He summarises:

From Tuvalu the *fātele* has influenced the dance of four neighbouring island groups. While Tokelau and Kiribati retain the original name for the dance, Wallis, Futuna, and Rotuma have adopted different names. In Wallis and Futuna the name *fakaniutao* ([dancing] in the manner of Niutao) designates this dance. In Rotuma modern dancing appears to have originated as an amalgam of styles and the name *tiap furau* is given.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 10.** Dispersion of *faatele* in the South Pacific as shown in Allan Thomas, *New Song and Dance from the Central Pacific* 134



A genre of dance written as *fātele* in the Tokelauan language is believed by many Tokelauans to have come to Tokelau from Tuvalu.<sup>40</sup> It is interesting to note that the origins of Tokelauan *fātele* are as ambiguous as that of Tuvaluan *faatele*. Some say it is an import from Tuvalu; others claim it is an indigenous invention.<sup>41</sup> However, like in Tuvalu, the consensus is far from broad and the exact answer to the question of its historical origin is far from certain, though Thomas's research suggests it was from Tuvalu.<sup>42</sup>

There are several similarities between Tuvaluan *faatele* and Tokelauan *fātele*. Like Tuvaluan *faatele*, the *fātele* of Tokelau employs the use of box.<sup>43</sup> The tin is present in Tokelauan *fātele*, though

<sup>38</sup> Allan Thomas, *New Song and Dance from the Central Pacific* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1996) 134.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 134.

<sup>40</sup> Tokelau was at one point administratively part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (now Kiribati and Tuvalu). This perhaps partly explains the musical exchange which took place.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 110.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 133.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 23.

it is not always used.<sup>44</sup> Like Tuvaluan *faatele* there is a group leader.<sup>45</sup> Tempo acceleration and textual brevity also occur in Tokelauan *fātele*.<sup>46</sup>

Tuvaluan *faatele* has dispersed to Kiribati and is known there as *batere*.<sup>47</sup> Very little has been published regarding the *batere*. Lawson is the only academic to have studied *batere*; her work gives more attention to the older dances of Kiribati. What can be said of the *batere* is that it is considered 'light,' is widely practised throughout Kiribati, and has been 'incorporated into Kiribati events.'<sup>48</sup> Unlike Tuvaluan *faatele* there is no 'intensive coaching,' and it can be learned by audience participation. In my interview with a Kiribati family, the consensus was that *batere* is not a serious dance but, rather, is light entertainment. Likewise, Lawson states that in comparison to their own performance genres, the I-Kiribati describe the *batere* as 'happy.'<sup>49</sup>

Wallis and Futuna, presently a French overseas possession, is approximately 500km south of Tuvalu. A common dance there is named *fakaniutao* (also known as *niuato*), which translates as 'dance from Niutao,' an island of Tuvalu. Thomas observes that *fakaniutao* has several similarities to *faatele*. First, the name expressly denotes a Tuvaluan origin. Like *faatele*, *fakaniutao* employs short, repeated phrases and tempo acceleration, as well as the use of a box.<sup>50</sup> Written accounts of this genre come from Burrows's collection of *fakaniutao* texts in 1932,<sup>51</sup> as well as Mayer's analysis of twenty-eight *fakaniutao* in his doctoral dissertation.<sup>52</sup> However, detailed research regarding the apparent Tuvaluan origin of *fakaniutao* has yet to be carried out.

There are also musical parallels between Tuvaluan *faatele* and the music of Rotuma, Tuvalu's closest southern neighbour. Historically, cultural exchange between Tuvalu and Rotuma was significant; to this day there are many Tuvaluans who claim Rotuman heritage.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, musical exchange has occurred, at least from Tuvalu to Rotuma. The *tiap furau*, meaning 'foreign dance or song,' and the Tuvaluan *faatele* share many similarities. Textual brevity, accelerating tempo, and similar dance all point to a Tuvaluan origin.<sup>54</sup> It should be pointed out that, unlike the *batere* of Kiribati and the *fātele* of Tokelau, which have direct and undeniable links to Tuvalu, the *tiap furau* is more likely a *faatele*-influenced genre. However, there has been little research in Rotuman music, and any conclusions drawn here are tentative.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 24

<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 84.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 29, 53.

<sup>47</sup> Tuvalu and Kiribati were part of the same political entity (the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony) for nearly one hundred years. The avenues for musical exchange surely would have been numerous.

<sup>48</sup> Personal communication, Anna Bryden, 18 Jan. 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Mary Elizabeth Lawson, 'Tradition, Change and Meaning in Kiribati Performance: An Ethnography of Music and Dance in a Micronesian Society,' PhD thesis, Brown University, 1989, 177.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 142–43.

<sup>51</sup> See E.G. Burrows, *Songs of Uvea and Futuna* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1945).

<sup>52</sup> See Raymond Mayer, 'Les Codes de la Danse à l'Ile Wallis (Uvea),' Doctorat d'État thesis, University of Paris, 1987.

<sup>53</sup> Personal communication, Alamai Sioni, 21 Feb. 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 144.

<sup>55</sup> It should also be noted that there are Tuvaluan settlements in the town of Elise-fou in Samoa, and the island of Kioa in Fiji. It is probable that *faatele* is practised in these communities, but no research has yet been undertaken in these areas.

While the 'where' of *faatele* dispersion in the Pacific has been discussed, how *faatele* came to be dispersed is a much more difficult question. There is no question that political and economic colonialism played an overarching role in the spread of *faatele*. By 1877 the British Empire had 'spheres of influence' over most of the Pacific.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Thomas aptly observes that '[t]he European Powers' areas of jurisdiction and the history of colonization established new lines of communication for administration, missions, and trade and for the dissemination of the new music and dance.'<sup>57</sup>

Although Thomas's claim that political colonialism was the chief impetus for *faatele* dispersion in the Pacific, I believe that musical exchange was also precipitated by economic activity and the need for labour in the phosphate mines of Nauru and Banaba Island. This demand for labour was met by recruiting able-bodied men from the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (which included Tokelau at times in its history). Sir Albert Ellis, who travelled to the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati) in the 1940s, discussed the link between *faatele* and *batore*:

An interesting development in the social life of the Gilbert and Ellice colony is to be seen in the displacement of the national dance of the Gilbertese, the *ruoia*, by the *faatele* of the Ellice Islanders, or *batore* as the Gilbert native pronounces the word. Major Holland, who is a recognised authority on Gilbertese matters, considers the change has come about as one of the results of the B.P.C. [British Phosphate Commission] employment of such large numbers of both islanders at Ocean Island, and I think he is correct ... The *batore* has effectually displaced the *ruoia* so far as the younger folk are concerned, and in more recent times the *batore* could be heard at Ocean Island every night except Sunday. I believe it has been adopted at Nauru also, and evidently has come to stay. It is performed with much vigour and evident enjoyment, some of the young fellows sitting round an empty box or table on which they drum with their hands in perfect time, and with such emphasis that 'the drum' sometimes collapses under the strain. To this accompaniment several young fellows or perhaps women are lined up in front of the group, and go through a varying series of rhythmic movements, chanting meanwhile, but the general atmosphere is one of enjoyment. I have never seen any improper element appear at one of these dances.<sup>58</sup>

According to Ellis, it was the multi-ethnic work environment of the Banaban Island and Nauru phosphate mines that led to this musical exchange. This is significant, as it gives direct evidence of how and where this musical exchange took place. It also provides an explanation for why there are seemingly two types of musical dispersion at play. Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Kiribati were all at one time administratively part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands group, thus the 'lines of communication' were not only political, but labour-related.<sup>59</sup> Contrarily, Rotuma, Wallis, and Futuna had less contact during this period, although musical exchange was present historically, through inter-island trade.

It is clear that since European colonisation, the opportunities for musical exchange between Wallis, Futuna and Rotuma have been more limited. Conversely, the shared colonial

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<sup>56</sup> Hugh Laracy, ed., *Tuvalu: A History* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies and Extension Services, University of the South Pacific / Ministry of Social Services, Government of Tuvalu, 1983) 127.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 133.

<sup>58</sup> Sir Albert Fuller Ellis, *Mid-Pacific Outposts* (Auckland: Brown and Stewart, 1946) 224–26.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas, *New Song and Dance* 133.

administration of Kiribati, Tuvalu and, at times, Tokelau provides an explanation as to why the *tiap furau* and the *fakaniutao* are more *faatele*-influenced than veritable musical facsimiles found in Tokelau and Kiribati.

Stone justly articulates that musical ethnography should be 'rich in descriptive details.'<sup>60</sup> It is for this reason the focus of this article has partly consisted of basic descriptive details, while at the same time advocating what Nettl describes as 'giving cultural insiders a voice'<sup>61</sup> in musical ethnography. Through this description of *faatele*, some general implications have become clear. *Faatele* is a syncretic genre containing both European and indigenous musical elements. On its most basic level, *faatele* is simple entertainment and its purpose is just that: to entertain and uplift the spirits of the participants. Yet it touches on virtually all facets of Tuvaluan life. First, *faatele* is an inclusive musical genre, that is, participation is not limited by age, gender or social standing. Second, this inclusivity creates a shared experience, which strengthens community ties. Third, this shared experience serves as an educational device, maintaining connections to land and sea, and reaffirming morals and religious beliefs.<sup>62</sup>

Though description of *faatele* is important, the question of its origins and dispersion is of great interest to Pacific historical ethnomusicology. Through a Tuvaluan historical perspective, *faatele*'s already acknowledged status as a Tuvaluan invention has been strengthened. *Faatele* in its current syncretic form emerged sometime after the arrival of Christianity in the late 1800s to early 1900s. Through historical, colonial, economic, and post-colonial lines of communication, *faatele* and its musical characteristics have spread from Tuvalu to western and central Polynesia, as well as Micronesia and, more recently, to the global diaspora of these many nations. Finally, this Tuvaluan historical perspective has also added a key element to the ongoing dialogue of *faatele*'s distribution throughout the Pacific.

*Faatele* is not just a musical/dance genre; it is a metaphor for the Tuvaluan way of life. Through shared, inclusive musical experience, *faatele* creates a strong identity marker, not just on the community or island-based level, but on a national level. *Faatele* creates a sense of being, a sense of 'Tuvaluan-ness' which, despite the potentially devastating and already occurring effects of climate change, will live on in diaspora, should Tuvalu's physical landscape be made uninhabitable.

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<sup>60</sup> Stone, *Theory for Ethnomusicology* 4.

<sup>61</sup> Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts* (Illinois, University of Illinois Press 2005) 242.

<sup>62</sup> These are the major functions of *faatele*, though it should be noted that 'event'-based composition can encompass whatever subject matter the community deems important.