

## Communal fishing in Tokelau: The *inati*

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One of the unique characteristics of life in Tokelau is the strong traditional institutional structure and the many customary practices that people still practice. Gender roles are still strictly followed and, in spite of modern influences and entertainment, tasks and obligations are still organised traditionally. Fishing in particular is still highly influenced by tradition, customary practices, fishing lore and skills. The *inati*, a communal fishing and distribution practice, is an example of such a system. This fishing ritual, as will be described in detail later, is well known to Tokelauans, even though there is no written rule that defines the activity. The people, however, understand their roles and know what is expected of them when such communal functions are implemented. A decision to hold the *inati*, or any other communal fishing activity, comes from the *aumanga* (men's group) in collaboration with the *taupulega* (Council of elders). It is then the duty of the *pulenuku* (village mayor) to get the message out to the people and organise the activity.

Traditional institutions and associated rules and norms that regulate life on the islands are known to and respected by people. The *taupulega* (chiefs) hold the ultimate authority in decision making in the islands. Although composition of the *taupulega* varies on each island, the authority held is nearly similar. The *faipule*, or elected chief of each island, heads the *taupulega*. Unlike the case in other Pacific islands this position is not hereditary and the *faipule* can be any of the elders who are members of the *taupulega*. Matters of national interest are considered at the General Fono level, the highest-decision making body in the country. The *pulenuku*, who also participates in the *taupulega* meetings, is the mayor of the village, and is responsible for the day-to-day running of village affairs. There is no specific divide between traditional roles and public roles in Tokelau. The *ulu* for example, is also the Minister for Environment on the islands. Thus, traditional leadership thrives alongside publicly held offices, and those in the *taupulega*, the General Fono and the *ulu* of Tokelau make decisions that involve both tradition and modern public services. Tokelau in this regard, has a unique system of leadership where the traditional system and its associated customary laws and regulations have as much influence as modern national laws.

Tokelau is a patrilineal society with men as heads of households responsible for decision-making. Changes in family composition due to migration have resulted in many female-headed households. In these cases, women are expected to look after the children and to attend to domestic chores for the family's welfare. Men make decisions and perform most communal tasks around the village. As in other Polynesian islands, women are protected and not expected to participate in physical work outside of their homes. Women spend most of their free time involved in handicraft making.

Fishing is central to the lives of the Tokelau people. Men are especially involved in most fishing activities and fish nearly daily. Fishing continues to be important for subsistence consumption, and, to a certain degree as exchange items for relatives living in Samoa and New Zealand. Because of their regular fishing participation, younger men are as familiar with traditional knowledge, skills and seasons, fish behaviour, effects of tides, winds and moons as the older people.

The men are expert fishermen, and through generations of fishing they have accumulated fishing lore and skills. Most of the fishing activities on the islands are still traditionally practised: best locations for fishing and times of fishing are still dependent on studying lunar phases, tides, weather and understanding fish behaviour. Skills, rituals and knowledge still remain but methods used in fishing have changed with time. Use of modern lures, large nets and diving torches at night are now common.

Women are not usually engaged in fishing. There were, however, instances where women accompanied husbands on fishing trips. Because men went out fishing almost daily, and because there was an abundance of fish, there was no urgent need for women to also fish or look for food. There is however, documentation on women's fishing activities in the past, such as when they went in search of reef fishes, edible crustaceans, sea eggs, crabs and squids (Bishop Museum 1937). Also recorded were a range of fishing gear and activities, including fish traps, spear fishing, bow and arrow, scoop nets, dip nets, seines, flying fish nets and turtle fishing.

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## Trevally fishing

In September, 2003 I accompanied men on an early morning fishing trip for trevally around Nukunonu. There were stories of people still relying primarily on their knowledge of the tides, winds, and behaviour of fish, and I decided to see this for myself. I stood in knee deep water at five thirty in the morning at a pass in the reef. This was where passages or migration channels from the ocean opened out into the lagoon. This was our position for almost half an hour, unmoving, watching the waters come in and waiting for signs of the fish schools that we were expecting to come our way. The men had already closed off the passage to the lagoon with three large nets, they then took up strategic positions around the net. The nets were placed in a semi-circle, one adjacent to another, forming the semi-circle, with another net placed at the back of the nets. The semi-circle opened out into the direction of the opening from the reef channel to the lagoon. The men had maintained that during the initial phases of the moon at the in-coming tide in the early hours of the morning, fish would travel through the reef channels from the ocean side to the lagoon. While waiting for the trevallies to appear, the men pointed out a school of sharks feeding close to the edge of the reefs on the ocean side, and a school of bone fish that was making its way through the channels to get to the lagoon. Black terns were perched precariously on the black rocks lining the divide between the ocean and lagoon, also looking out for fish. The birds sat quietly watching the channels and would signal where the fish were by flying around and making a lot of noise.

At a signal from one of the men, we could see silvery tails on the top of the waves, coming in through the passage and closing in fast. As they neared where we were standing, the men on the sides of the already set nets closed in. At the same time, two men standing at the sides of the nets kept on beating the water with sticks. This was to help herd fish that may try to escape back into the nets. The school of trevally headed straight for the middle of the waiting nets and the men immediately closed off the nets, then diving and lifting up the bottom end of the nets to keep the fish in. The trevallies were caught, killed and the nets quickly put out again. In each such capture there were 12-16 large trevallies. The next time around, the wait was not for long, as it took about 10 minutes between each school to come in. The amazing feature of this activity was their knowledge of where to put the nets out and which channel to close off, because while there was a school of bonefish that passed close by, the trevallies came through the one we were at.

## The *inati* system

This is a traditional community fishing and distribution system that is still being practised today in all the three islands of Tokelau. The system ensures that all households in the village have some fish. All men of the village (*aumanga*) are required to take part in this fishing activity and the specific fishing activity pursued is communicated to them before they go fishing. This is usually done a day or two before the *inati* takes place to give men time to re-arrange plans to suit the fishing time, and also to prepare and get bait, lines, and other necessary gear. Targeted fish is sometimes tuna and other deep ocean fish, the species in season or specific reef fish. Men are notified of what the targeted species is beforehand. Men go out fishing in groups at a specified time, and then on their return the catch is pooled and brought to a common distribution place. Whatever time of the day and night the men return, distribution starts. While men are out, women prepare tea and food for them. This is served to men on their return.

The catch is shared equally amongst the villages. The village *pulenuku* is in charge of the distribution. All members of households are counted, and the sharing of fish depends on the number of people in households. Before distribution starts, fish is sorted into different species and sizes. Bigger families get bigger shares, and smaller sized families have smaller portions in terms of number and type of fish. Most of the younger men that take part in the fishing activity, end up having the smallest amounts because they have smaller families. But tradition and respect dictates the process, and it was evident that the men and everyone in the village were very happy with whatever they were allocated. Every head of household name is listed then after the distribution, their names are called out and mostly children and women come with their buckets or basins to collect their portions.

While in Atafu, the *inati* targeted tuna and other deep-sea fish. The *inati* was performed during the meeting of the *fatupaepae* from all the islands in Tokelau. In Fakaofu, the target species was a species in season at the time. The *inati* was performed during our stay there and one of the reasons was to catch fish for the visitors to take back to Samoa. In Nukunou, the *inati* targeted tuna. Discussions with people in the village revealed different perspectives on such activities. The men said it was custom and they liked taking part in the village communal fishing or *inati*. Women, especially the older ones looked forward to these *inati*, and stated that it was a way of taking care of women and also the older people who can no longer fish. Some children that were questioned said that it

was a good system that ensured that everyone had enough food to eat. Traditional written regulations that relate to fishing state that in cases where any man or fisher person catches more than he needs, this was to be shared. Catches of turtles and other such species were required to be shared to other people in the village.

Traditionally organised fishing activities such as the trevally fishing and *inati* are a unique feature of life in Tokelau. In addition to these, specific areas to

look for certain species are well known. People are familiar with their fishing ground and know which areas are for which species, and the times they could be fished, the best times to go fishing and what types of moon phases or tides to wait for. These are knowledge that people still possess and use when fishing.

Photo: Aliti Yunisea



**Young boys in the village usually help to sort out the catch.**

Photos: Aliti Yunisea



**Catch usually include different sizes of the target species and many other species.**



**The target species is sorted out first, then other fish is sorted and distribution starts.**