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Place names on Nukuoro Atoll

by

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### I. Island names and atoll building in Nukuoro

Nukuoro Atoll (Ponape District, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands) is a nearly circular atoll with a deep central lagoon and a nearly unbroken fringing reef averaging one third of a mile in width. From the Northwest in a clockwise direction around to the Southwest, range a series of modu<sup>2/</sup>, or small islands (see map). At low tide it is usually possible to walk from one modu to another without getting wet; at high tide, the modu are separated by narrow watercourses. When the tide is coming in or out, these are swiftly moving.

Etymologically modu means something 'terminated'. In this case it is the land above the high water level, on which grows a typical atoll vegetation, which is broken by sand, coral and sometimes water.

The present disposition of the forty-six modu in Nukuoro atoll is thought by the inhabitants to have persisted for a long time: people are aware of only a few minor changes in the atoll topography. Careful research, however, has uncovered evidence of greater change than is popularly recognized. There is also considerable evidence that some of these changes represent accretions to the atoll in the form of whole islands built by the hand of man. Since atoll-building is not generally thought of as comprising part of the technical resources available to the inhabitants of insular Oceania, this evidence is thought to be significant. The mode of research into this matter which we have employed is also thought to represent a useful method which might produce comparable results elsewhere.

Our first indication of the existence of extra names for modu, in addition to those names which we had collected for the modu now visible, came with our recording of a mou, or mnemonic (see below), for modu which was difficult to relate to the present disposition of the atoll. Clearly the mou listed the modu names in order — beginning with the modu in the extreme Southwest of the atoll and proceeding in a counter-clockwise direction to the terminal modu in the Northwest. Thus it was possible to use those names for contemporary modu which coincided with names in the mou as reference points from which to zero-in on the confusing disparities. In some cases, a synonym was found for a current name which coincided with the mou name; in some cases there were several names where a single modu now exists; in other cases a modu is now present, although it is not mentioned in the mou.

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<sup>2/</sup> Spelling in the accepted Nukuoro orthography of the well-known Polynesian word motu.

Where it appeared that a single modu had been formed from smaller ones, geological reconnaissance usually demonstrated the former existence of channels in the form of wide sandy swaths extending continuously below the topsoil from the lagoon side of the atoll to the sea side. Often place names for parts of the island (of which there are a very great number—a matter to be covered in a subsequent paper) coincided with the relevant modu names in the mou. A cadastral survey also showed that these former channels were invariably plot boundaries—contrasting in their irregularity with normal straight land boundaries. Each of the older atoll inhabitants was able to cite one or two cases of such processes; eventually every suspected case was confirmed in one or more traditional stories collected from these people.

It might seem strange that a "mnemonic" for the names of the modu in an atoll could have so long resisted being changed to accord with the contemporary facts. But this appears to have been precisely the case. These mou, of which there are a considerable number—covering the names for different kinds of sea life, plants, varieties of pandanus, names of priests, birth order of people born into the community during a certain span of time, etc.—are considered somewhat esoteric; one seeks out one of the 'old people' who knows such things usually only late in one's own lifetime—to equip oneself with the knowledge to assume one's role as one of the 'old people'. The mou gives only one or two syllables from each of the complete names which it incorporates, so it is not immediately apparent to the incurious that a contradiction exists between the abbreviated name and that thing it represents. Few people who have learned these mou make an effort to relate them to the entities they are supposed to represent. It is, after all, only the knowledge of the mou which counts—not its implications. Thus it is really not, properly speaking, a 'mnemonic'; it is a token for the kind of systematic knowledge which is prized as an emblem of status, without much contributing to that knowledge. Where such devices occur, they might be exploited in the way in which we have done here to provide some historical perspective on geography. The fact that they do not change with the times is for the historian a blessing. The fieldworker is warned, however, that some individuals do compare their modu to the contemporary names, or compare their modu to those of other people—the mou thereby becoming corrupt through alteration. Only the collection of a large number of mou and traditional stories supplemented by on-site inspection can be expected to produce satisfying results.

For modu which appear on the map but not in the mou, we found that these either represented a division of one island into several following a severe storm—a fact which was handed down from one generation to the next as a matter of oral history—or had been "purposely left out of the mou because they were not natural islands but islands made by men". In general, the method of making a modu appears to have been the accumulation of hunks of loose coral relatively close to the lagoon side of a wide portion of reef, letting the sea wash up sandy fill, and then planting trees and shrubs in this soil to consolidate it (perhaps using vegetable matter from elsewhere to enrich the soil). An island made in this way became the exclusive property of the man or family that made it. One suspects that the process would take at least several generations.

To this day the islands which are claimed to have been recently built up in this way are owned by a single individual or family—in contrast to the overwhelming majority of modu, in which a great number of families have interests. This contrast is illuminated further by the suggestion that 'ownership' on this atoll derives ultimately from the person who made a piece of land productive. Before the advent of the copra trade, one suspects that a great deal of available land on other modu was not exploited—land closer to one's residence providing ample sustenance. Land on the main island (Nukuoro), which is used for building sites and the raising of coconuts for eating and drinking, and land in the six taro patches (two on the main island and four on nearby islands) has long been at a premium and is highly fractionated between the various families. Land in other modu is similarly divided—most probably representing an earlier situation in which the present owner's ancestor brought a piece of it under cultivation for subsistence purposes, or cleared a house site [although houses are presently concentrated in a village on the main island, there was formerly considerable occupation of other modu, which in certain seasons provided a more convenient base from which to collect and dry the fish which were eaten at other times of the year when the fishing was poorer].

The affinity of native ideas about ownership with those about productive use is illustrated by a story that recounts a land dispute between a Nukuoro man and someone who had arrived not long before from another island. It is recounted that they decided the issue between them by each planting a tree, with the understanding that the one whose tree grew up strong would henceforth have undisputed title to the island. The interloper's tree flourished and his opponent quietly withdrew!

Having uncovered several cases of island building from the omission of names from the mnemonic, one began to suspect something similar in the case of several small islands, all of which are called Deahu. In contrast to the other modu, these have no distinctive name—being discriminated where necessary by adding the name of the current owner. Like the modu just discussed, all of them are owned by a single individual or family. On at least some of them there is evidence of the construction of seawalls and other techniques for maintaining the integrity of the small land mass. There is a possibility that these too are made by man, our inference here being principally philological. Other island names containing the morpheme ahu possibly reflect a similar state of affairs.

The etymology of deahu is somewhat obscure. De is one kind of 'article' like the English 'the'; dahu is the preparation made for one kind of fire—that in which sticks, or other combustible things are piled up in an orderly fashion. Ahu is not used in Nukuoro at the present time for a pile of stones, but in many other Polynesian languages, e.g. Tahitian, Hawaiian, it means just that. The argument here is at best tenuous, but it does at least suggest that island building on Nukuoro may have been a much more important factor in the present layout of the atoll than our few better-documented cases would lead us to suspect.

Several other modu have alternative names which include the root ahu. Here again we suspect atoll-building at some remote point in time. In addition, certain additional island names point to human or natural consolidation.

Augmentation of one's property at the expense of the sea proceeds to this day in many smaller ways, especially along the lagoon face of the main island. Property owners here have erected stone piers to hasten the accumulation of drifting sand; seawalls are built out a bit from the high water level and debris is thrown into any low damp area behind them to provide fill; only enough coral is removed from the reef on the lagoon side to provide a channel for canoes to their storage sheds at low tide, the rest being left there to prevent sand from washing away.

A practical feature of our observations here is the possibility which may still exist on many atolls for increasing the available land under cultivation. Where lagoon depth, fishing, rainfall, and other resources permit, atoll building under government sponsorship might produce extra land for an expanding population without good opportunities for migration. On comparatively well-endowed atolls, such as Nukuoro, such potentialities put the matter of "population pressure" in clearer perspective: presumably if the population were in fact "pressing" on available resources, they would be doing something about it.

Table I and accompanying notes present the substantiative detail which we have omitted in the above discussion.

Table I

<u>Order</u>	<u>Present Name</u>	<u>Mou</u>	<u>Mou Name</u>	<u>Other Names and Notes</u>
1. ***	Moduilalo	gele	Mogelegele- idaha	O, P
2. ***	Olomanga	olo	idem	I, O
3. ***	Deahua	#		(3 & 4 together called Lumodu)
4. ***	Moduilodo	gele	Mogelegele- ilodo	L, O
5. **	Gausema	gau	idem	M
6. **	Senugudai	nugu	idem	J; Senuku (= abbrevia- tion)
7. *	Masabu	hili	Mchilignadua	B
8.	Masagumani- ingage	sagu	idem	
9. **		ahu	Ahua	C
		nau	-nau	C
	NUKUORO	mada	Madalam	C
		gina	-gina	C
		hidi	Dagahidihidi	C
		bua	Moduobua	C

Table I (cont.)

<u>Order</u>	<u>Present Name</u>	<u>Mou</u>	<u>Mou Name</u>	<u>Other Names and Notes</u>
10. **	Dagamanga	dau	Daumaha	K; Taumaha (singular of daumaha)
11.	Ladi	dini	idem	( <u>di</u> + <u>ni</u> for completion of <u>mou</u> element)
12.	Demodu	modu	idem	
		nini	Ninidauana	D
13. *	Haisisi	hai	idem	B; Deangimaiolo
		baga	Bakau	
14. *	Ngaligi	ligi	idem	E; Bagau
15.	Sungaulohu	sunga		
		holu	maholu	F
16. *	Tuila	tui	idem	
17.	Haduganae	hadu	idem	
18.	Balaiasi	bala	idem	
19.	Moduovega	vega	idem	
20.	Baonga	bao	idem	
21. ***	Ahuloloa	loa	idem	
		dini		
		lage		
		dule		
		lage		
		bo		
		guba		
22.	Moduodula			Moduosauualoualo, Ngana
23. ***	Ahuedolu			G
24.	Moduovae	vae	idem	
25. ***	Deahu	ahu	idem	H, N
26. ***	Deahu	ahu	idem	H
27. ***	Deahu			A, H
		ei		(indicates a pause between major groups of <u>modu</u> )
28.	Sabinimadogo	bini	idem	
29.	Modubodai	dai	idem	
30.	Moduidua	dua	idem	
31. ***	Ahuilodo	lodo	idem	
32.	Dahangahaino	hanga	idem	
33.	Dahangadabu	hanga	idem	
34. ***	Ahulegalega	lega	idem	
35.	Masagumani-ilalo	mani	idem	
36.	Niulegida	niu	idem	
37. ***	Ahulanui	#		
38.	Dolungahale	dolu	idem	
39.	Dalagivao	dala	idem	
40.	Moduia	ia	idem	
		deni		
		ua		

Table I (cont.)

<u>Order</u>	<u>Present Name</u>	<u>Mou</u>	<u>Mou Name</u>	<u>Other Names and Notes</u>
41.	Modunui			
42.	Namooilodoa	namo	idem	
43. ***	Hauosiga	siga	idem	Ahuesiga
44.	Gabinivele	vele	idem	
45.	Dalainamo	hau	Haungaobo	
46. ***	Deungagelegele	#		0

Key to columns in Table I

"Order" = serial position of the modu beginning at the Southwest extremity of the island chain and proceeding counterclockwise to the Northwest extremity [this is the local convention for the enumeration of the modu]. [see accompanying map]

Asterisks indicate the evidence for atoll building:

- \* indication of agglomeration of modu through natural or human agency
- \*\* present extent and productivity of modu appears to be the result of atoll building
- \*\*\* probably owes its existence to human agency

"Present name" = name in most common use at the present time. These names, and all other Nukuoro words in this paper, are written in the standard phonemic orthography for Nukuoro. This orthography was developed by a former Chief; we have assisted only in codifying it and in helping to standardize certain usages, spelling of proper names, word division, and the like. One such usage—now locally accepted—which is reflected in these names, is the writing of all proper names as a single word with an initial capital letter, except where this obscures juncture between vowels. In the latter case, a hyphen separates the vowels which might otherwise be elided [v. 8 & 35 above].

"Mou" - gives the elements of the mou in order [conventionally recited in lines of four elements each]. The rules of this (and all other) mou that enable one to associate the elements with names for modu are three in number: (1) each element consists of two syllables; (2) each element pertains to one modu; (3) the elements are in order—as outlined above for the enumeration of the modu.

"Mou name" - the name for the modu to which the mou element refers. These are all thought of as alternative—usually older—names for the modu. "Idem" in this column indicates that the present name and the mou name are identical.

"Other names" = alternative names for the modu, in addition to the mou name.

"Notes" - refers by letter, to the notes following.

Notes

N.B. Numbers following letters refer to modu, as enumerated above.

No gloss is provided below for ahu. This we have treated as best we can in the text.

# - Islands thus marked are said to have been left out of the mou because "they are not natural islands but made by men". Since there is considerable evidence that the mou includes artificially made modu, this is taken to mean that the modu in question were constructed long after the earlier efforts reflected in the mou. A rough date could possibly be established for each of these cases through geological comparison of the consolidation of these modu with those undisputably much older.

- A. 27 was formed from two ahu: Ahuidua + Ahuidai
- B. Several contemporary modu names are said to be names for only one of the several modu from which it was formed: 7, 14, 13 (Haisisi said by some to be just part of Deangimaiolo). It is not of course possible to determine in these cases whether the joining of adjacent modu proceeded spontaneously or was effected with human assistance, except by detailed geological survey.

Several names in the mou are said to refer to once separated modu which are now joined together. In most of these cases, such names are now found as place names on the consolidate.

- C. 9. a. mada = Madalama (mythological name of Nukuoro)  
b. -gina- joined Madalama, as represented in Madagina (another very old name for Nukuoro)  
c. Deahua and -nau- joined to form Ahunau and Ahunau joined Madagina. The Southeastern portion of Nukuoro has two place names which reflect this join: Debigi ('rocks put together') and Debai.  
d. Two separate modu, Dagahidihidi and Moduobua (each of which is a place name in the extreme Northeast portion of Nukuoro island), each joined the above agglomerate to form the present island of NUKUORO.
- D. 13. Ninidauana is a place name on Haisisi.
- E. 14. Ngaligi is thought by some to be a synonym for Bakau, but tradition records that it was originally an adjacent island.
- F. 16. Maholu is a place on Tuila at present (southern portion). Tradition records that it was once a separate islet.
- G. 23. Ahuedolu ('three ahu') is said to have been formed from Dinilage + Duleilage + Boguba, each of which was formed from two others. This construction leaves the status of island 22 in doubt.



Notes (cont.)

- H. 25, 26, 27. These ahu, collectively called Denga-ahu ('the (pl.) ahu') are distinguished where necessary by adding 'belonging to [name of owner]'

Place names on several modu whose mou name gives no clue to prior consolidation reflect some human intervention in its formation.

- I. 2. Olomanga (etymologically, olo 'place where the sand comes together' + manga 'something branching') is divided into three main divisions (running seaward to lagoonward).

Deahuagelegele (gelegele = 'sand')

Deahuagasi (gasi = a kind of shell)

Deahunau (nau = kind of tree—planted at the water's edge to consolidate soil against erosion by the sea)

- J. 6. The side of this island toward the channel is called Debigi ('rocks put together').

- K. 10. South side is called Deahunau [cf. note I].

A few modu have disappeared or become smaller.

- L. Between 4 and 5 Deahuaodeubi was washed away in a storm.

- M. 5. Extension of this island to the channel (by its inhabitants) was subsequently washed away.

- N. Between 25 and 26 one ahu (Ahu o Taohenga; later called Ahu o Maane) was washed away in a storm.

- O. Those islands which contain gelegele ('sand') in their name are thought to have been originally sandbanks, which required considerable human effort to make into permanent and productive modu: 1, 2, 4, 46.

- P. Occasionally a legend recounts the making of an island by a human being.

## II. Directions on Nukuoro

Looked at on a map oriented North, the 46 islets (modu) of Nukuoro Atoll form a backwards "C". The chain of islands stretches from the Southwest, around in a counter-clockwise direction to the Northwest.

The Nukuoro perceive this in the reverse way. The southwestern terminus of the chain is ngage (nga makes a substantive of the following adjective; age is not now used other than to indicate a direction on the atoll—in many other Polynesian languages, however, (e.g. Maori) it means 'front'). The northwestern terminus of the chain is ngaiho (nga + iho 'back'). The traditional rhyme for enumerating the modu, the mou, begins at ngage and ends at ngaiho.

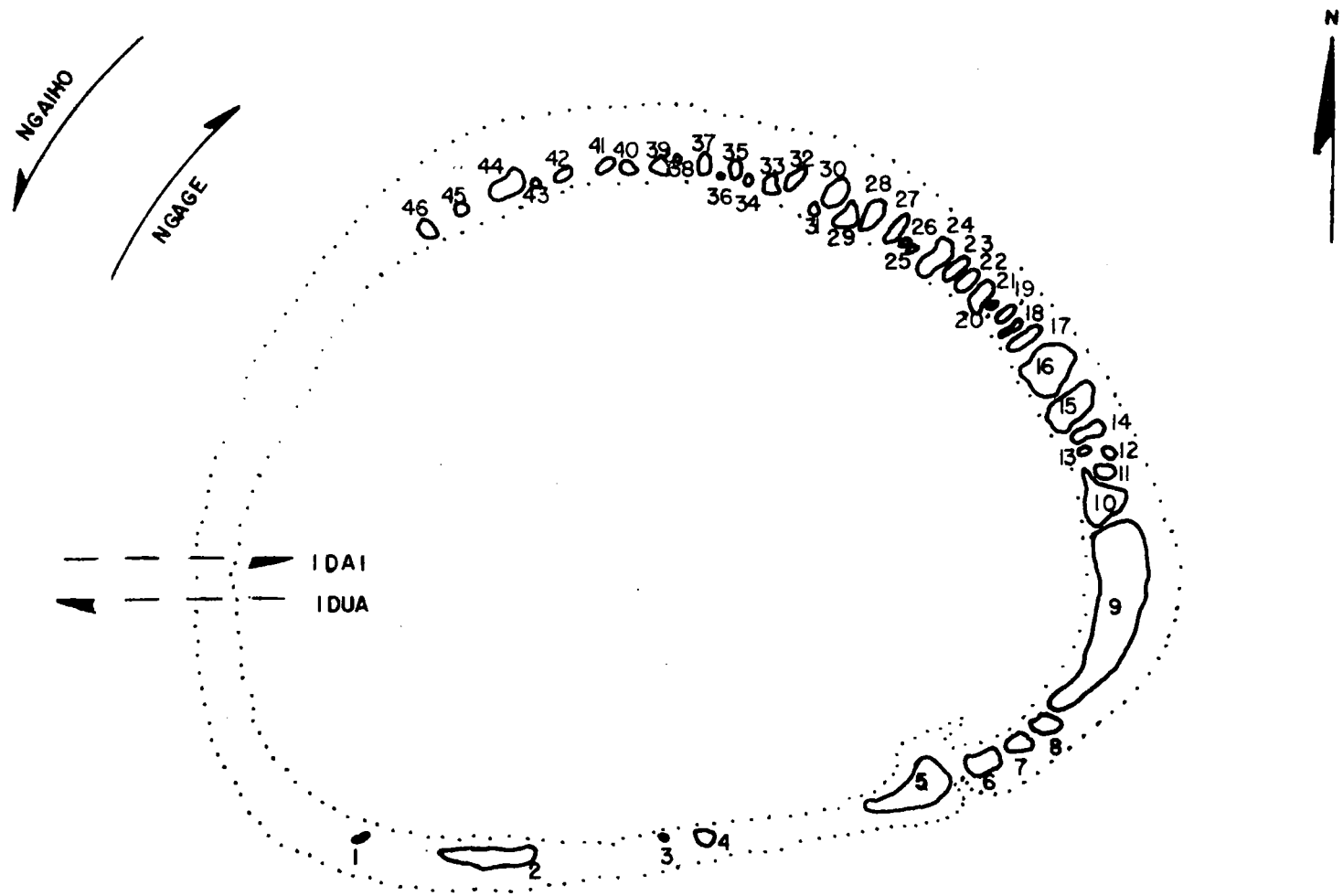
From any place on the atoll one is 'going ngage' when one is going away from ngaiho, and vice-versa. In the unlikely event that one were proceeding afoot along the submerged reef which separates ngage and ngaiho, the same rule would apply: leaving ngage, one is going ngaiho, and vice-versa.

Thus it will be seen that directions on Nukuoro are relative, not absolute: one may be 'going ngage (or ngaiho)' and be proceeding along any possible compass bearing at the time. This is somewhat obscured in the minds of some of the younger and better-educated Nukuoro who, having been taught compass directions in school, want to construe ngage as 'South' and ngaiho as 'North', since this is the case on the island of Nukuoro on which the single village is established (and by far the area within which these terms are used most frequently). Since most travel to other modu is by canoe (in which case one would simply say that one were 'going to [name of modu]'), these individuals are not apt to use or hear these expressions enough to remind them that their usage by the majority contrasts with this modern usage. Another factor that tends to obscure the relativistic character of this usage is the fact that any travel towards the island of Nukuoro is called 'going hale' ('home'). Going away from ngaiho towards Nukuoro or away from ngage towards Nukuoro one does not have occasion to say that one is going ngaiho or ngage. Thus in everyday usage 'going ngage' is used only for foot travel from Nukuoro towards ngage and 'going ngaiho' from Nukuoro towards ngaiho; but most especially these terms are used for travel on the islet of Nukuoro.

Parallel to this directional terminology which refers to direction around the circumference of the circle formed by the atoll's islets, is a pair of terms, one of which refers inward toward the center of the circle, the other of which refers outward from the circumference. I dai ('on the water', i.e. 'lagoonward') contrasts with i dua ('on the back', i.e. 'seaward'). Here again there is a bit of confusion when these terms are made to apply to 'West' and 'East'—thinking of the absolute directions to which they correspond on the main island. Usage of these terms, however, is consistent: from any part of the atoll, i dai is toward the center of the lagoon and i dua is toward the open sea, irrespective of the absolute directions involved.

It will not be argued on this slender bit of philology that the orientation in native thought of Nukuoro Atoll towards the South indicates that its people originally came from there—although the people themselves and early ethnologists claim precisely this—but we would argue that spatial orientation, especially the matter of looking inward, away from the moana ('void', 'open sea') is reflected in their social organization. This matter, however, is more conveniently relegated to a subsequent paper.

# NUKUORO ATOLL



### III. The names of the islets on Nukuoro Atoll

In making maps, it is generally considered cheating to simply copy an older map. However, no such strictures seem to apply to place names. Cartographers are wont to perpetuate the most preposterous errors through inattention to this aspect of map-making.

There are several unfortunate results. Native peoples, now almost universally literate in their own language, are not infrequently offended when the names of their islands are incorrectly spelled. This is especially true where there is a standard official orthography to which the surveying party pays not the slightest heed, preferring to record place names impressionistically (and, inevitably, inconsistently). Would it be appropriate for a Dutch geographer to spell New York as 'Nieu Jook'?

In non-self-governing territories educators are making an effort to teach local people a respect for European standards of scholarly and scientific work. Maps are widely circulated in these territories. Errors in the maps themselves may escape notice for decades; but place names are immediately visible—and immediately judged.

The worst possible result of inaccurate geographic names is the confusion they engender. On Nukuoro, the people are inclined to believe that "the white man knows best." If the names on the maps are right, then the Nukuoro orthography, which has been the educational standard for over forty years, is wrong. In point of fact, the Nukuoro orthography conforms to the highest standards of linguistic science. The author, a trained linguist and anthropologist, was unable to improve on this orthography, which had been devised more than a generation ago by a local chief. The names on the maps, on the other hand, are most definitely wrong. Not only is the orthography in error, but islets are, in some cases, misnamed altogether.

The following is a definitive list of the present names for the islets of Nukuoro Atoll. Names on other charts are listed to support the above accusations.

Table II

Names of Islets on Nukuoro Atoll

<u>Names at Present</u>	<u>Sheet 5133 1 BE AMS Series W856</u>	<u>U.S. Navy H.O. Chart 6042</u>	<u>Deutsche Admirali- tätskarte 97 (corrected to 1911)</u>	<u>Map of the Survey Ship "Orion" (#91)</u>
1. Moduilalo	--	--	--	--
2. Olomanga	Oromange	Oromange	Oromange	--
3. Deahua	Deahna (Teahua)	Deahna	Deahua	--
4. Moduilodo	Motuiloto	Motu Iloto	Motuiloto	--
5. Gausema	Kaujema	Kaujema	Kaujema	--
6. Senugudai	Shenukdei	Shenukdei	Schenukdai	Schenukdei
7. Masabu	Masops (Mohiringatua)	--	--	Masops
8. Masagumani-ingage	Masakomani	--	--	Masakomani
9. NUKUORO	NUKUORO	NUKUORO	NUKUORO	NUKUORO
10. Dagamanga	Takonran	Takonran	Takonran	Takonrau
11. Ladi	Rati	--	--	Lati
12. Demodu	Heisisi	--	--	Timotu
13. Haisisi	Te Motu	--	--	Heisisi
14. Ngaligi	Pakhau	--	--	Bakau
15. Sungaulohu	Shugnaurohu	Shugnaurohu	Schugnaurohu	Schugnauroho
16. Tuila	Tuila	Tuila	Tuila	Tuila
17. Haduganae	Hatu Kanai	--	--	Hatu kanei
18. Balaiasi	Pala i iasi	--	--	Paleyasi
19. Moduovega	Moduoveka	--	--	Motuowega
20. Baonga	Paonga	--	--	Bounga
21. Ahuloloa	Ahuroroo	Ahuroroo	Aluiroroo	Ahu roroo
22. Moduodula	Moduotura	--	--	Motuotura
23. Ahuedolu	Ahuwatoru	--	--	Ahuwatoru
24. Moduovae	Motuwei	Motu Wei	Matuwei	Motuwei

Table II (cont.)

	<u>Names at Present</u>	<u>Sheet 5133 1 BE AMS Series W856</u>	<u>U.S. Navy H.O. Chart 6042</u>	<u>Deutsche Admirali- tätskarte 97 (corrected to 1911)</u>	<u>Map of the Survey Ship "Orion" (#91)</u>
25.	Deahu*	Teahu (Teachua)	--	--	Deahu hatinga
26.	Deahu*	--	--	--	Deahu wihinger
27.	Deahu*	Tehu (Teachua)	--	--	Deahu
28.	Sabinimadogo	Sapinimatok	Sapinimatok	Sapini matok	Sapini Matok
29.	Modubodai	Motuitua	Motu Ituo	--	Mot Bodei
30.	Moduidua	Tahangaroro	Tahangolo	Motuituo	Motuitua
31.	Ahuilodo	Ahuiroto	--	Tahanga roro	Tahanga roo
32.	Dahangahaino	Motupotai	Tahangatabu	--	Ahuilodo
33.	Dahaugadabu	Tahangatabu	--	Tahanga tabu	Tahanga tabu
34.	Ahulegalega	Ahu Legalega	--	--	Ahuregatik
35.	Masagumani-ilalo	Masaku Mani	--	--	Masako mani tara
36.	Niulegida	Niurekita	--	--	Arakanui
37.	Ahulanui	Alukanui	Alukanui	Arukanui	--
38.	Dolungahale	Tolu na hale	--	--	Terung hari
39.	Dalagivao	Motunui	Motonui	--	Taraki wahu
40.	Moduia	Tarakaivao	--	--	Motu ia
41.	Modunui	Motoia	--	Motoma	Motonui
42.	Namoilodoa	Namuirotoa	Namuirotoa	Namui rotoa	Namui rotoa
43.	Hauosiga	Hau Usiki	--	--	Ahuosi kat
44.	Gabinivele	Kapinivere	Kapinivere	Kapini vere	Kapini vere
45.	Dalainamu	Tavainamu	--	--	Tarei namu
46.	Deungagelegele	Tonga Kerikeri	Tonga Kerikeri	Tonga kerikeri	Tonga kerikeri

\* These islands, collectively called Denga Ahu, are locally distinguished from each other, when necessary, by adding the name of the present owner. Since this stipulation changes the name in every generation, cartographers are advised to use only the name listed.