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Souverainetés autochtones. À travers l'Océanie, au-delà de l'État

Putting the State in its Place. An Ethnographic Look at Tuvalu's Sovereignty in the Context of the Ecological Crisis

Remettre l'État à sa place. Un regard ethnographique sur la souveraineté de Tuvalu dans le contexte de la crise écologique

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Putting the State in its Place An Ethnographic Look at Tuvalu’s Sovereignty in the Context of the Ecological Crisis

by

Nicola MANGHI*

ABSTRACT

Composed entirely of low-lying coral atolls and reef islands, the Polynesian microstate of Tuvalu is at risk of being submerged by sea levels rising due to global warming. Such circumstance raises unprecedented scenarios: were it to become uninhabitable, in fact, Tuvalu would be the first state to lose its sovereignty due to a physical damage to its territory. However, traditional understandings of sovereignty are of little use in assessing Tuvalu’s political consistency, and speculations on the future of the country, such as those that predict its disappearance, are at risk of overlooking the specificity of its history. Combining a historical and an ethnographic approach with an analysis of recent land conflicts that arose in the capital of the country, this article explores the question of Tuvalu’s future within a) the long history of institutional vicissitudes that led a disparate group of islands to become a sovereign state; and b) a study of the dynamics underlying the political texture of Tuvalu and the complex architecture of its sovereignty.

KEYWORDS: Tuvalu, Global Warming, Sovereignty, Statehood, Territory, Land Conflict

On the morning of Saturday 29th June 2019, Fiji Airways had to cancel its scheduled flight from Suva to Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu. In an unprecedented event, a group of protestors had blocked the Sir Toaripi Lauti International Airport by parking two heavy trucks on the airstrip. Despite the intervention of law enforcement units, the vehicles could not be removed until the evening. This action had been announced on the previous day, in a note delivered to the director of the Tuvalu Aviation and to the Tuvalu Travel Center. The anonymous

RÉSUMÉ

Composé entièrement d’atolls coralliens et d’îles basses, Tuvalu risque d’être submergé par l’élévation du niveau de la mer due au réchauffement climatique. Tuvalu serait ainsi le premier État à perdre sa souveraineté en raison d’un dommage physique causé à son territoire – une circonstance qui soulève des scénarios sans précédent. Les conceptions traditionnelles de la souveraineté sont peu utiles pour décrire la consistance politique de Tuvalu, et les spéculations sur l’avenir du pays, telles que celles qui prédisent sa disparition, risquent de négliger la spécificité de son histoire et de son architecture institutionnelle. En combinant une approche historique et ethnographique, et en analysant de récents conflits fonciers dans la capitale du pays, cet article place la question de l’avenir de Tuvalu dans a) la longue histoire des vicissitudes institutionnelles qui ont conduit un groupe disparate d’îles à devenir un État souverain ; et b) une analyse des dynamiques qui sous-tendent la texture politique de Tuvalu et l’architecture complexe de sa souveraineté.

MOTS-CLÉS : Tuvalu, réchauffement climatique, souveraineté, État, territoire, conflit foncier

author of the document, who was writing as a representative of “the Funafuti Land Trust Board (FNLTB) and the landowners of the Funafuti airfield”, concluded the letter with an intimidating statement:

“I give you this notification so that you can make arrangements as deem proper from your end and in the spirit that you will quietly remove yourself from our lands immediately today. Take note that we are also closing the airfield for any incoming plane commencing from today.”¹

1. “Closing of the Funafuti International Airport by the Funafuti Landowners commencing at 4pm today the 28 June 2019”, unsigned document, author’s personal archive.

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PHOTO 1. – A view from Tuvalu's government building. Funafuti, February 2024 (cliché Nicola Manghi)

This sudden and unexpected act of force, an exception in a context usually pictured as peaceful and consensual, came as the culmination of a long-running dispute that had seen the indigenous landowners and the national government (photo 1) contending over the rent due for the public occupation of native land. By sabotaging a key national infrastructure, members of the indigenous community, or *fenua*, of Funafuti threatened to reclaim the lands their families had owned for generations, and explicitly questioned the lawfulness of the public occupation of native land. By calling into question the legitimacy of the central government and its position with respect to the eight *fenua*, they exposed a point of structural fragility in Tuvalu's institutional architecture. Furthermore, by evoking the virtual – and yet plausible – scenario of an evicted the state's eviction they were challenging the very place of the state in the archipelago.

At that time, I was on the island of Vaitupu, which was set to be the main field site of my ethnographic research on Tuvalu, sovereignty and climate change. As the country was getting ready

to host the 50th Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) a few weeks later – an appointment considered of paramount importance, on which the government of then Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga had staked a large share of its political capital – the news of the protest and the many reactions in the region propagated quickly. Gossip – a major vector of the country's politics, as Besnier (2009) has brilliantly shown – started spreading. A low-quality photo of the above-cited letter quickly circulated on social media, and the radio reported that a number of PIF member countries were questioning Tuvalu's ability to meet the logistical challenge. Allegedly, some even ventilated the hypothesis of withdrawing their delegation. This event and its political aftermath (which I was able to follow from Vaitupu and then to observe more directly in Funafuti when I moved there to attend the PIF) suddenly brought to my attention the latent conflict between Tuvalu's central government and its island communities and made me realize the urgency of redirecting my research to more thoroughly consider the unique role the state plays – and the peculiar “place” it occupies – in the country's domestic politics.

Issues concerning statehood and sovereignty in Tuvalu are most often debated in relation to the risk of submersion that the islands of the archipelago are faced with due to the consequences of global warming (Rayfuse, 2009; Stratford *et al.*, 2013; Farran, 2022). An entirely low-lying island state, Tuvalu's territorial integrity is put in jeopardy by the rise of sea levels caused by the anthropogenic warming of the planet. Such circumstances make the country an ideal case study for legal scholars interested in the issue of environmentally-endangered statehood: were it to disappear, Tuvalu would probably be the first state to succumb due to physical damage to its territory. Such analyses, however, tend to naturalize the relationship between the archipelago and its current institutional status: the sovereignty of the country is only turned into a matter of concern by the external threat of global warming looming over the fate of the country. As a result, Tuvalu's national politics and the peculiar structure of its institutional arena are understudied. Based on extensive fieldwork research² and with the intent of contributing to fill this gap, this article focuses on the domestic politics of Tuvalu, highlighting the structural dynamics underpinning the national unity of this scattered archipelagic nation. What is the role of the state within the domestic context of Tuvalu's politics? How are the different island communities relevant in discussions of the country's sovereignty? How can Tuvalu's distinctive political arrangement

2. This article is based on fieldwork research conducted in Tuvalu – mostly in Vaitupu and Funafuti – between April and October 2019, and is part of a broader and still ongoing research project on Tuvalu's sovereignty in the context of global warming.

contribute to current discussions on sovereignty in Oceania?

With these questions in mind, this article takes the 2019 airport blockade as an opportunity to shed new lights on this issue. While studies directly concerned with the threat of sea level rise (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2013; Torres Camprubí, 2016; Farran, 2022) focus primarily on what the jargon of political scientists labels as the “external sovereignty” of the country (its ability to stand and act as a united actor on the international scene), I take into account the “internal” dimension of sovereignty in Tuvalu (the relationship between the archipelago and its institutional form). I thus frame the conflict between the indigenous population of Funafuti and the national government as the contingent actualization of a latent tension that, from both a historical and an institutional point of view, is intrinsic to the unity of the Tuvaluan nation.

Sovereignty, internal and external

With 26 km² of land surface and a population of 11,000, Tuvalu is today one of the smallest and least populated countries in the world (Falefou, 2017: 30). Despite being a member of the UN Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the country is perhaps best described as a “large ocean state” – a term that has gained broader circulation in the past few years, after being originally proposed by the President of Palau in 2016 (e.g., Chan, 2018): with an Exclusive Economic Zone of almost 750,000 km², in fact, it has the highest sea-to-land ratio in the world (Casati & Gurchani, 2023: 109). The archipelago groups nine islands: Nanumea, Nanumaga, Niutao, Nui, Nukufetau, Vaitupu, Funafuti, Nukulaelae and Niulakita. From both a cultural and an administrative point of view, it comprises eight island communities, or *fenua*, as the small island of Niulakita (0.42 km²), historically uninhabited, falls under the jurisdiction of Niutao and is only populated by a few families. The word *fenua*, the Tuvaluan version of a widespread Austronesian term, deserves clarification, as a somewhat kaleidoscopic term. Depending on the context, *fenua* can alternatively refer to an island, the community of its inhabitants, or a country. As such, it embodies a very nuanced Tuvaluan notion of place and the multiple and dynamic sources of attachment available to Tuvaluans. Moreover, as it often happens in other Polynesian languages, the proximity with the term used for “placenta” (*fanua*) outlines a semantic continuity between birth and place (Falefou, 2017: 144-146). Due to this richness, the word *fenua* has proved useful for interesting speculations on the affective geographies of global warming-induced migration among Tuvaluans

(e.g., Stratford, Farbotko & Lazrus, 2013). In this text, however, I employ it to refer to the indigenous communities inhabiting each of the eight islands of Tuvalu.

In 1970, Ivan Brady described the archipelago – then under British Colonial rule and known as the Ellice Islands – as follows:

“In the short span of one hundred years, the Ellice Islands have been transformed from a series of petty chiefdoms into an incipient nation state while pivoting on the axioms of what were once a foreign Church and an imported Administration.” (Brady, 1970: 45)

Despite relative cultural and linguistic³ homogeneity suggesting a long history of exchanges, the eight *fenua* of Tuvalu were indeed independent polities before being grouped together by the British in 1892, to form the Ellice Islands Protectorate (later to be merged, with neighbouring contemporary Kiribati, into the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony in 1916). If national independence achieved on 1st October 1978, three years after separation from Kiribati – strengthened the unity of the archipelago, it certainly did not do so at the expense of single-island identities. Quite to the contrary, the autonomy of the island communities was valued and reinforced to the point that, as Michael Goldsmith writes, “[i]n some respects [...] Tuvalu is best seen as a collection of eight or nine local states, with central government acting as a coordinating device” (Goldsmith, 2005: 108). The archipelagic nature of the country is also reflected in the name chosen at the time of independence: “Tuvalu” literally means “eight standing together” or, as suggested by Niko Besnier (1999: xix), “eight traditions”.

However, in the last thirty years, sovereignty has turned into a matter of great concern for Tuvaluans and is now regarded as a double-edged sword. The word sovereignty lends itself to numerous uses and bears different and at times contradictory meanings. Anthropology in particular, often under the influence of the work of Foucault (2010) and Giorgio Agamben (1998; cf. Malkki, 1995; ONG, 2006), has provided a key contribution to the debate on sovereignty, helping to nuance the notion away from strictly legalistic understandings and showing the multifacetedness of the issue (e.g., Favole, 2021). The case of Tuvalu is interesting in this regard, as it raises an unforeseen predicament: were it to lose its entire territory due to the effects of global warming – mainly coastal erosion and sea level rise (Storlazzi *et al.*, 2018) – in fact, the country “would find itself in a situation that has certainly not occurred in modern history” (Yamamoto & Esteban, 2013: 35). Tuvalu’s legal and political predicament can be unpacked into two different sub-issues: firstly, Tuvaluans are at risk of finding

3. With the notable exception of the island of Nui, where – along with Tuvaluan – the language spoken is Gilbertese.

themselves in the condition of internationally displaced persons, their destiny exposed to the sovereign will of foreign states. Forced migration due to environmental reasons being an emerging issue for international law, current regulations concerning asylum – the 1951 Geneva Convention and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1967 which extended its reach – do not offer protection to so-called “environmental refugees”.⁴ Secondly, it is unclear what would happen to Tuvalu’s institutional status as a sovereign state in case its territory were to become entirely uninhabitable. In the sphere of public international law, the usual reference when issues of the birth and death of states are at stake is the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States of 1933; while never officially adopted by the international community, it is nevertheless considered to hold customary value. According to the Montevideo Convention, to exist, a state is supposed to feature four criteria: a) a defined territory, b) a permanent population, c) a government, and d) the ability to enter into relations with other states. While the idea of the “sinking island” is powerful in the global imaginary, Jane McAdam has stressed that

“the focus on loss of *territory* as the indicator of a State’s ‘disappearance’ may be misplaced, since these countries are likely to become uninhabitable as a result of diminished water supplies long before they physically disappear.” (McAdam, 2012: 124)

Consequently, and perhaps contrary to what one might expect, it is the requirement of a permanent population that seems to be most urgently jeopardised by current ecological transformations. However, as there are no antecedents, it is impossible to know what will happen when the reality of Tuvalu or another low-lying island country will no longer match the prescriptions of the Montevideo Convention. It is also difficult to predict when such a scenario will take place, and which actors will be involved in deciding the legal and political consequences of such occurrence. It comes as no surprise, then, that legal scholars are divided on the issue. Some affirm that if a country’s territory becomes uninhabitable and the population is forced to leave, then the polity’s claim of statehood is doomed to fail (on Tuvalu specifically with this angle, see Rayfuse [2009]). Others – among whom notably Crawford (2007) – on the contrary, contend that “the idea of extinction of the international legal personality of a State following the loss of its material elements cannot be automatically inferred” (Torres Camprubí, 2016: 8).

Under current ecological circumstances, then, sovereignty threatens to become a curse for Tuvaluans. In the urgency of the threat posed by global warming, sovereignty draws the boundary of a community of destiny that could doom Tuvaluans to becoming “climate refugees” – citizens of a state set to disappear. However, the effects of statehood on the broader reality of Tuvalu are multifaceted, and they are flattened out when the country is treated as the *in vivo* specimen of the climate “apocalypse”. In particular, legalistic approaches tend to overlook the politico-economic dimension of sovereignty in Tuvalu – another, and notably more beneficial, implication of its sovereign status. A good example of the “resourcefulness of jurisdiction” (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000), and in fact one of the original case studies employed by Bertram and Watters (1985) in their theorization of the MIRAB economy, Tuvalu can be described as a «rentier» (Bertram, 1986: 820) of its sovereignty: the main source of its national income is the sale of fishing licences, and a smaller but still important share of its GDI is made by renting out the national internet suffix, which happens to be the profitable .TV (*cf.* Baldacchino & Mellor, 2015). Other than entitling the country to lucrative revenues, then, sovereignty represents powerful political capital in the sphere of international relations: as the ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan) demonstrate (Marinaccio, 2019), for a country like Tuvalu sovereignty serves as a veritable “currency” (Yarina, 2019) in the diplomatic arena. And the very role that Tuvalu has come to play in international conferences and media coverage regarding global warming can also be linked to Tuvalu’s institutional status, as skilful diplomacy has supplemented the particular – and yet not unique⁵ – geomorphological conformation to make the country a poster child in the fight against global warming (*cf.* Goldsmith, 2015). For example, on the occasion of the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP) in Paris in 2015, Enele Sopoaga, at the time Prime Minister of Tuvalu, concluded his keynote statement by telling the audience that “if we save Tuvalu, we save the world”, thus binding the political stake of the meeting – an international commitment to keep the warming of the global atmosphere below 1.5 Celsius degrees compared to pre-industrial measurements – to the conditions on which the country’s fate seems to depend. It is through careful political conduct on the international scene that Tuvalu has become a powerful symbol of a global struggle and an “obligatory passage point” (Callon, 1984) for climate diplomacy (Farbotko, 2005; Farbotko, 2010).

4. Jane McAdam (2009) offers an original perspective on this. For a broader framing of the issue, see McAdam (2012).

5. The Maldives, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands find themselves in a similar situation, with their entire territory lying at a maximum height of a few meters above sea level.

But the ecological threat is not a good reason for restricting one's gaze to an impoverished understanding of the legalities of statehood. Rather, it is necessary to enlarge the perspective to encompass the broader cultural, political, and economic stakes of sovereignty. For instance, scholars have effectively pointed out how focussing exclusively on sovereign entities as political subjects, especially in Oceania's "sea of islands" (Hau'ofa, 1994), can pollute the discourse on conservation (*cf.* Mawyer & Jacka, 2018) – while simultaneously suggesting that Oceanian notions and practices of sovereignty have decisive implications for environmental governance (Bambridge *et al.*, 2021). Similarly, it can be argued that reducing Tuvalu to its ecologically-jeopardised borders leads to overlooking the complex dynamics that concur to compose the country's political arena and the many divisions within the alleged homogeneity of a sovereign space. Most importantly, however, these approaches only consider the issue of Tuvaluan sovereignty from the outside, solely concerned with the possibility that the country may cease to exist. As such, they tend to naturalize the historical contingency that led the population of eight tiny islands scattered on a vast surface of ocean to become the people of a nation state.

Disputing the land

The occupation of the Funafuti airstrip by landowners in June 2019 made the news in the region and inflamed the political climate of the country, as it was preparing to host political leaders from the whole region to attend the PIF. It provoked a harsh reaction on the part of the government, and was later to result in a High Court case and an order – in actual fact never enforced – to arrest the culprits (RNZ, 2019). In his provisional judgement, Chief Justice Charles Sweeney spoke of "significant sovereign risk" with relation to the events, and wrote:

"These flights are an essential national lifeline for Tuvalu, which lies a three days sea voyage 1070 kms north of Suva. The deliberate obstruction of air traffic attacks the wellbeing of all Tuvalu's citizens, attacks the ability of the government and the civil service to perform their duties as custodians of the public interest and attacks the economy of Tuvalu. It also attacks the amenity of life of its citizens. It sends a message to airlines that flights to Tuvalu are attended by commercial and possibly safety risks which might well render those flights uncommercial." (Pareti, 2019)

Funafuti's airstrip was originally built in 1943 by a Seabee detachment of the 2nd Naval Construction Battalion of the US Navy as part of the occupation of the atoll during WW2. It is to

date the only active airfield in the country⁶ and in fact a facility essential to the country's sovereignty. Depending on the season, two or three weekly flights connect Funafuti with Suva on a regular schedule, and a weekly flight to and from Tarawa has been active at times. The rest of the time, the airstrip functions as a public park, where people go for walks or gather to play volleyball. Tuvaluans are also proud to repeat that in Tuvalu "you can sleep on the runway" – a reference to the country being rated among the safest in the world. Until the government building was erected a few years ago, the waiting area of the airport – built in the fashion of a traditional meeting-house – also served as venue for the national Parliament. So, the protest took place not only in a strategic logistical juncture of the country, but also in a place charged with symbolic power, serving multiple purposes and featuring as a distinguishing mark of national identity.

Oral accounts collected in Funafuti between August and October 2019, combined with the documents produced by the World Bank (e.g. Kaly, 2015), enabled me to reconstruct the events that led to the airport blockade as follows. The vicissitudes that came to a peak in 2019 had begun in 2011, when the Government approached the World Bank with a project aimed at improving Funafuti International Airport (photo 2) and the national aviation sector. The Tuvalu Aviation Investment Project (TVAIP) was approved in December 2011 and funded with an initial sum of 11.83m USD. However, it was not until 2014 that the issue turned problematic, when a court case led to the unexpected discovery that the lease agreements concerning the airfield had expired in 2009 – a circumstance which until then had gone unnoticed by both parties to the agreement. As soon as the legal void was highlighted, a Compulsory Crown Acquisition of Land order was issued by the government on 19th December 2014, with the goal of keeping the air link between Tuvalu and the rest of the world effective – an issue deemed of public interest by the government. However, due to delays in notification and legal technicalities, the order ended up becoming void. It nonetheless irritated the landowners, who felt treated without due respect. The government responded with a more consensual approach: on 2nd April 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed with the airfield's landowners agreeing on a two-year interim term during which the parties were to negotiate a new agreement.

This MOU was followed by a study funded by the World Bank to document the legal history of the airfield, which found there was "a lot of

6. Other airstrips were built in Nukufetau and Nanumea during the US occupation, but are now in a state of disrepair. A UK-funded sea-plane connection between Funafuti and some of the outer islands was terminated some ten years after independence.



PHOTO 2. – Landing in Funafuti. Funafuti, January 2024 (cliché Nicola Manghi)

confusion around leasing arrangements” (Kaly, 2015: 24). The situation concerned the airport as well as other facilities: many landowners “were not sure what arrangements were in place, suggesting that even for road [sic] (where an arrangement exists) they do not have a leasing document in hand” (*ibid.*). During the consultation process,

“Significant issues were raised by the Matai [i.e. heads of the land-owning families: *cf. infra*] in loss of trust of the government regarding land issues. People felt that government was violating their rights to the land, that they were not properly informed, and in some cases that they had lost confidence in the process and did not feel safe.” (Kaly, 2015: 24)

But the scope of the dispute was to widen, and a much more disruptive conflict was ready to unfold: concomitantly, in fact, it was found that all the leasing agreements between the government and private landowners would expire in 2017 – like the MOU that had just been signed. From the sole airfield, the land dispute spread to the whole government lease, and from the exclusive concern of the indigenous population of Funafuti it turned into a national affair.

As of September 2017, when the two-year period set by the 2015 MOU lapsed, the parties were not able to find an agreement. At the time, the lease rate was 3,000 AUD/acre per annum. The MOU was thus renewed for a further two years, but the tone of the quarrel turned harsher.

To convince the landowners, the government unilaterally raised the rate to 3,500 AUD/acre per annum. On their part, and with the aim of being more effective in their lobbying, the landowners decided to collectively refuse to withdraw the government payments from the bank. Meanwhile, the negotiations came to involve the whole country – that is, representatives of land-owning families from all the islands of Tuvalu. The government set up an inquiry across the archipelago to collect their requests for the new lease rate negotiations, and concomitantly asked for a technical advisor to look into the issue. Different island communities had rather diverging demands, all deemed too high by the Government.

At the beginning of 2019, the parties had still not managed to reach an agreement. The problem was not merely economic. Landowners were irritated by the approach of the government, who seemed not to treat the issue with proper respect and with the care that Tuvaluan protocols prescribe. On 29th of June, things came to a head. The landowners had obtained an informal commitment from the government to sign a further MOU and agree on a temporary increase of the rate to 4,000 AUD/acre per annum until the organisation of the next general election, scheduled for September, thus postponing the issue for the new government to deal with. It was in response to the perceived government’s inaction that they decided to occupy the runway

with two trucks. The action produced immediate effects: on the same day, Maatia Toafa, acting PM in the absence of Sopoaga, who was overseas on an official visit, signed the MOU, thus raising the rate to 4,000 AUD/acre per annum retroactively from 2017.

Balancing power, locating sovereignty

Symbolically, this was the Funafuti indigenous community claiming back land allegedly usurped by the government. As argued in the introduction, however, this conflict highlights a structural fragility in the country's architecture. Tuvalu is a rare case of a non-partisan parliamentary democracy: the 16 members of parliament are elected by island-based constituencies, and a majority is formed in the aftermath of elections on the basis of personal ties, common political interests, or previous agreement. Formally the sovereign of Tuvalu is Charles III of England, represented *in loco* by a Governor General. Typical Western political institutions co-exist with others, bearing the heritage of the longer history of the archipelago and most often labelled as "traditional". While an appeal to tradition and continuity with a deeper past is certainly what legitimizes them, those institutions could be equally described as local: they arrange island affairs and defend the interests of the *fenua*, sometimes entering in a conflictual relation with the central administration.

Parochialism is a salient cultural trait of Tuvalu's national identity. While this reflects the country's archipelagic nature, a number of historical factors played a role in shaping it into its contemporary version. In particular, the social organization of the *fenua* was deeply marked by the presence of the Samoan pastors of the London Missionary Society (LMS), who occupied the archipelago piecemeal between 1865 and 1975 and were instrumental in entrenching the parochialisms and counter-loyalties that coexist with the operations of central government to this day. In the interest of consolidating their authority, the pastors welded the existing scattered hamlets into a consolidated village on each island. These centralising tendencies, together with the LMS's religious monopoly, resulted in a tremendous stress being placed on island unity. The distinctiveness and autonomy of each island, in turn, was reinforced by the Congregationalist

character of the LMS whereby the local congregation is at liberty to organise its own affairs. In this context, the church competed with the colonial administration,⁷ reinforcing island parochialism in the face of the authority and the centralising tendencies of the central government. As Brady (1975: 124) noted, this resulted in Christianity (in the form preached by the LMS and later by the country's national church, the Ekalesia Kelisiano Tuvalu, or EKT) being absorbed by Tuvaluans as their "own" cultural trait, while the administration originated from British colonialism was retained as a "stranger"⁸ institution.

Cultural parochialism translates, in political terms, into a latent tension between the central administration and the individual *fenua*. Since independence, the main political challenge of Tuvaluan politics has been to balance the interests of the central government with those of the single *fenua*, as well as the influence of Western political values and principles with practices and ideologies understood as traditional (*cf.* Levine, 1992). The current institutional setting of Tuvaluan governance was laid out in 1997, when the Falekaupule Act was passed, an institutional reform designed – in line with similar efforts pursued in the region around the same time – to decentralize the function of government and to overcome the institutional heritage of colonization. The Act introduced two institutions: the Falekaupule and the Kaupule. The word "Falekaupule" ("the house of the group of rulers") refers both to the physical building of the meeting-house, formerly known under the Gilbertese name of *maneapa*⁹, and the institution that gathers inside it, i.e., the island assembly. While having always been endowed with paramount customary power (although with significant variations over time and between islands: *cf.* Besnier [2009: 67] for the case of the southern atoll of Nukulaelae), prior to 1997 the island assembly had no official recognition in the institutional structure of the country. The Act defines the Falekaupule as "the traditional assembly in each island of Tuvalu which, subject to this Act, is composed in accordance with the Aganu [customs] of each island" (Government of Tuvalu, 2008: 9). Although the word Kaupule ("the group of rulers") has referred in the past to a number of different institutions (*cf.* Besnier, 2009: 64-65), it is used now to point to the administrative branch of the Falekaupule

7. While from a historical point of view missionization and colonization largely overlapped in Tuvalu (although the former began in 1861 and the latter in 1892), the two processes followed different paths and must be analytically distinguished (Goldsmith, 2019).

8. The reference, here, is of course the classic work of Marshall Sahlins (1981). Michael Goldsmith has discussed the work of Sahlins and the idea of the stranger king in the context of Tuvalu, although in relation to pastors and their position with respect to the national Church and the *fenua* (Goldsmith, 1989: 226-276).

9. Michael Goldsmith (1985) has convincingly claimed that not only the name *maneapa* but the very design of the building came from precolonial contacts with neighbouring Kiribati. Despite this, the Falekaupule is currently regarded as a national symbol and features on the country's coat of arms.

Island	Government Lease	Kaupule Lease	TOTAL ACREAGE
Funafuti	172.872	2.228	175.1
Nanumea	2.82	4.68	7.5
Nanumaga	1.41	3.355	4.765
Niutao	1.2344	6.24	7.4744
Nui	1.67	6.562	8.232
Nukufetau	0.46	6.5	6.96
Vaitupu	53.7	18	71.7
Nukulaelae	1.417	6.55	7.967
Niulakita	1.01		1.01
TOTAL	236.5934	54.115	290.7084

TABLE 1.– Acreage Leased by public institutions (government and Kaupule) as of August 2019, measured in acres (Source: Government of Tuvalu)

– its “working hand”, as Tuvaluans would often answer when asked to describe its function. Composed of six elected members, it serves as the intermediary between the central government and the eight *fenua*. As such, it represents the connection between an authority legitimated through recourse to tradition and sustained by the charismatic virtues of the *aliki* and his *mana*, and one that meets the legal-rational requirements of the state and the international community of which it is part.

Prior to 1997, the traditional chiefly structure had an acknowledged customary value, but was not officially recognized by state power (Kerley, Liddle & Dunning, 2018). With the Falekaupule Act, not only was the Falekaupule acknowledged as an official body of the state, it also became the founding institution of the country. Later amendments pushed this tendency further, to the point that in 2019 it was established that “a Falekaupule may by resolution decide to elect and terminate its Kaupule members directly” (Government of Tuvalu, 2019: 5). What matters most, though, is that the Falekaupule Act reversed the institutional structure of the Tuvaluan state: once pyramidal and based on the colonially-inherited centrality of the national government, Tuvalu became the quasi-federal state Goldsmith (2005) speaks about – to such extent that, from the perspective of Tuvaluan political philosophy, it could be argued that the Falekaupule is the ultimate source of sovereignty in the country. Today, in fact, the power of the Falekaupule is not clearly defined, and hardly restricted by the law. For instance, in a court case that gained international resonance and set an important precedent in the field, the Falekaupule of Nanumaga was recognized as having the power to choose local traditional values over

internationally-sanctioned human rights (cf. Olowu, 2005). This gives rise to a paradox: on the one hand, the Falekaupule was instituted by national legislation; on the other, however, the relationship between the Falekaupule and the law remains a complicated one – and there rests its power. The authority of the Falekaupule, in fact, is recalcitrant to any formal delimitation, and cannot be fully constitutionalized: no normative intervention can simply resolve or stabilize the complex relation between the Falekaupule and its legal context in a plain topology or a neat division of powers and competences.

Communities against the state

In Tuvalu, most land is collectively owned by extended families in what is known as the *kaitasi* system. The remaining land is the common property of all members of the island (in a regime called *fakagamua*).¹⁰ The term *kaitasi* – literally, the group of those “eating as one” – refers to an extended family entitled to the ownership of land. Each *kaitasi* is led by a *matai* (also known as *matua* or *pule o te kaiga* in the Northern islands: e.g., Falefou, 2017: 148), often the oldest male in the group, who is responsible for decisions concerning property and the arbitrage of conflicts that may potentially emerge between members. In Tuvalu, land can be inherited, gifted for specific reasons, and leased. With the exception of the islands of Nanumea, Nukufetau, and Funafuti, where it is strictly forbidden, the sale of land is also possible, although strictly regulated, and supervised by a land court. For this reason, land sale is fairly uncommon and can be considered a residual institution within the Tuvaluan land tenure system.

Strict regulations, combined with the archipelago’s colonial history,¹¹ have created an uncommon situation: with the sole recent and controversial¹² exception of Queen Elizabeth II Park, the outcome of a major land reclamation project in Funafuti, the Government of Tuvalu owns no land. The entirety of public facilities (government buildings, offices, schools, roads, the airport, etc.) lies on private land, acquired through leasing agreements between the government and the landowners at different stages in the history of the archipelago. However, government-leased land is not equally distributed among the islands of the archipelago, with the capital accounting for over 60% (table 1). The

10. Classic references concerning the Tuvalu land tenure system are Kennedy (1953) and Brady (1970, 1974). Further and more updated information can be found in Isala (1994). A recent and exhaustive summary can be found in Falefou (2017: 146-155).

11. Although it hosted a permanent population of foreigners – mostly composed of traders and missionaries (cf. Munro 1982: 136-137; 186-190) – since the late nineteenth century, Tuvalu never became a settler colony. This, combined with the scarce availability of natural resource, resulted in no land ever being permanently expropriated from its indigenous owners.

12. During my fieldwork in Funafuti, notable members of the Funafuti indigenous community shared their doubts concerning the Government’s title to Queen Elizabeth II Park. The issue may very well be taken to court in the near future.

second island in terms of government-leased land is Vaitupu (34%), which has long hosted the national secondary school and was recently chosen to host a vegetable garden funded by the Republic of China. The other islands only account for a few acres under public lease, mostly devoted to the primary school and the Kaupule facilities. The proportion becomes even more striking if the respective size of the islands is taken into account: with 2.4 km², Funafuti accounts for less than 10% of the total land area of the country, and is in fact the third smallest island in the archipelago, after Nukulaelae (1.82 km²) and Niulakita (0.40 km²).

Despite its small surface area, Funafuti is home to more than half of the country's residents, with a current population estimated to be 7,000. Statistics concerning land tenure and livelihoods single out Funafuti as an exception to the Tuvaluan norm – albeit an outstanding one in terms of population. Among the islands composing Tuvalu, Funafuti is the only one where the indigenous population is outnumbered by foreign residents of the atoll¹³ (mostly Tuvaluans belonging to other island communities, but also Fijians, I-Kiribati, and people from other parts of the world). Consequently, Funafuti has an incomparably higher proportion of people living on leased land and/or in rented houses compared to the other islands, and families in Fongafale (the islet hosting the main settlement in Funafuti) rely on market supplies, among which are mostly foreign goods, to a higher degree than the rest of the archipelago, where market relations are more firmly embedded within familial and social ties and livelihoods are more dependent on the produce of the land and the sea. Funafuti is also the country's main business centre, which makes land an extremely scarce resource on a 2.4 km² atoll, incredibly more profitable than on the outer islands, where low demand can meet an abundant supply at very low prices.

More generally, life in Funafuti is without doubt urban, and, albeit on a microscale, the town can be said to exhibit some of the salient traits of a metropolis – above all, a polarization of inequalities unknown in other parts of the country. However, the contingency of the vicissitudes that led Funafuti to become such an urban centre should also be kept in mind, as it plays a role in shaping both the place of the state within the archipelago and the political feelings of indigenous Funafutians with respect to public

institutions. During the colonial period, the archipelago of Tuvalu was always rather peripheral in the British concerns, and the main administrative centre in the colony was first established in Ocean Island (Banaba) and later moved to Tarawa. As the idea of an independent Tuvalu began circulating, it seemed natural to think of Funafuti as the future capital of the country: the large sailable lagoon and the airstrip built by the American Army during WW2 had already made it the most prominent logistical centre in the archipelago.¹⁴ Moreover, in 1972, the Severe Tropical Cyclone Bebe hit Funafuti, causing three deaths and severe devastation – an event that strengthened the Funafutians' collective identity (*Pasefika* n.d.) and is still annually commemorated. While planning reconstruction, the administration chose to give great credit to the perspective of Tuvalu's future independence, and took into account a rapid increase of the atoll's population. For this reason, a substantial area of Fongafale was acquired through leasing agreements with the indigenous landowners, in order to accommodate returning public servants previously based in Tarawa. This area is known as Fakkaifou (literally, "the new settlement"), and still hosts a large population today. The result was that "in just three years Funafuti was transformed from a hurricane-scarred administrative centre into the capital of an independent nation" (Macdonald, 1982: 264).

While the cohesion of the Tuvaluan nation is solid and the country extremely peaceful, the contingency of the archipelago's history deeply shapes the relationship of the *fenua* with the central government. In particular, the central government's location in Funafuti is often evoked by Tuvaluans. In debates over the country's history, it is common to hear people speculate about how their life would be different if the capital had been established on a different island. For instance, I was told several times on Vaitupu how grateful people were to their ancestors for refusing to host the capital of the newly independent state – a hypothesis that was debated briefly at the time.¹⁵ More recently, Enele Sopoaga mentioned the possibility of transferring the administrative center to Nukufetau, his home island, although it never became a concrete political project. And this is especially true for Funafutians, whose identity is deeply marked by both the honor they have and the burden they bear hosting the government on their native land.

13. In 2017, when the last mini-census took place, indigenous Funafutians accounted for 1,275 of the 6,611 usual residents of the atoll.

14. The colonial authorities were afraid that Funafuti might face a similar fate to Tarawa, which had become a costly and inefficient administrative centre. However, the suggestion of decentralizing the Government – an idea at times repropounded today – was never put into practice.

15. In a decentralization attempt, Vaitupu did host the Education division of the Ministry of Social Services for a short period of time in the 1970s. However, this arrangement proved inefficient and frustrating, and the division was soon transferred back to Funafuti.

According to the more pessimistic among them, this has entailed “losing their island”, as I heard repeated many times. The land-lease issue highlighted this trait very well: Funafutians could accuse the government of violating their rights to the land and disrespecting their authority, and, by evoking a scenario of eviction, remind everyone of the *fenua*’s longer and sovereign history. The historical contingency of the administrative center’s location in Funafuti thus produces contemporary political consequences: the balance of the union with the government is always up for debate, and eventually exposed to the risk of bankruptcy – as if the history that led the eight island communities of Tuvalu to merge into a national space could be reversed at any time, virtually at least.

This is the broader spectrum of issues that the 2019 airport blockade ended up concerning. The somewhat uncertain place of the state within the archipelago of Tuvalu was exposed. The public authorities were reminded of their provisional status, and faced with a potential scenario of eviction. Part of what happened has to do with the specific place that Funafuti holds in both the history and the political geography of the country. However, the conflict also highlighted a paradox that lies at the heart of Tuvaluan sovereignty. On the one hand, the state – and the government as its main agent – is what makes Tuvalu one, weaving the jurisdictions of the eight communities together and playing a logistic role both in guaranteeing the inter-island circulation of goods and people and in coordinating the social and economic life of the archipelago. On the other, however, the material conditions of its existence continuously need to be cautiously renegotiated. In other words, the relationship between the eight *fenua* and the central government harbors the potential to erupt when an issue becomes problematic. In the case of Funafuti, this relation is forced within the boundaries of the same island, shared out between overlapping jurisdictions that have to periodically renegotiate the conditions of their coexistence. In the capital, land is the source of a contention of typically post-colonial kind between an original authority, linked with the indigenous possession of land, and an occupying power whose legitimacy is in perennial need of careful maintenance, and always open to dispute.

Two parallel and yet distinct axes can be identified as the fundamental political vectors in Tuvalu: one that has the centre and periphery as its opposite poles and another in which “traditional” powers face “modern” institutions. They are the result of the encounter between two worldviews: one, pre-colonial, relating to a time when each *fenua* was sovereign, and stood at the centre of a political project; and another, of

colonial origin, which considers each individual island as the peripheral outpost of a centralized – albeit archipelagic – political space. Analytically, the two axes must be distinguished: one appeals to a historical criterion (modernity vs. tradition), the other to a spatial one (centre vs. periphery). In concrete terms, however, they happen to coincide: traditional instances and local interests are defended by the same institutions – the Falekaupule and the Kaupule. But this coincidence is contingent and historical, and, as such, open for reconsideration.

Conclusion

The Funafuti landowners who blocked the national airport in June 2019 resented the government for procrastinating over the signing of a new agreement concerning the rate due for the public occupation of native lands. However, the dispute grew into a conflict of greater magnitude, and culminated in an unprecedented act of force. To explain this, this article focused on the domestic structure of the sovereignty of Tuvalu.

The topology of the Tuvaluan state has the individual islands as the keepers of ancient customs and traditions and the central state as the representative of a bureaucratic power of Western origin. As such, it embodies and reproduces the contingent encounter of the eight island communities, and the vicissitudes that promoted their political unity and their becoming a state. History and structure intertwine: the contingency of past events translates into the precariousness of the state’s position within the archipelago. The state is indeed always at risk of being treated as a foreign institution, sometimes accused by members of the *fenua* of being a usurper of their land. Tuvaluans keep the state in a position of strangerhood, thus evoking a past in which each Tuvaluan *fenua* was an independent polity of its own and enforced a sort of island sovereignty that protected them from the expansive aims of the central government. It is by keeping the state at a distance that Tuvaluans can enjoy the benefits of sovereignty. Such domestic complexity should be kept in mind when the sovereignty of Tuvalu is discussed in the light of the risk that global warming casts upon it. While Tuvalu undoubtedly exhibits the distinctive traits of a cohesive nation, the country’s sovereignty is – perhaps paradoxically – founded on the contingent nature of its current arrangement. How future changes in the geomorphology of the archipelago will interact with such contingency cannot be foreseen.

Two final remarks deserve consideration. The first concerns my use of the notion of state. In this article, I have spoken of the Tuvaluan state as a quasi-virtual entity, highlighting the fact that it has to rent its place in the archipelago and

has no solid anchorage within its very territory. However, in an apparent paradox, the Tuvaluan state could be equally described as an inextricable bundle of relations: in the context of the country, the state is embodied by people who have family and political bonds to one or more specific *fenua*. And yet, their action is legitimized by reference to different contexts depending on whether they are acting in the name of their function or on their own behalf. If according to the Medieval political theology famously reconstructed by Ernst Kantorowicz (1957), the British king was thought of as having two bodies, it could be half-seriously said that members of the Tuvaluan Government have three: to their living body (in itself quite a complex one, embedded in family networks whose density and relevance to political affairs are in no way inferior to those of British royal family), they add a public persona that is itself dual, caught in the tension between the central state on whose behalf they act and the island community they were elected by. The issue of how statehood is embodied in its representatives adds a further layer of complexity to the role and place of statehood in Tuvalu, which, although relevant to the subject of this article, cannot be further delved into here.

Secondly, the distinctive dynamics of Tuvaluan sovereignty that I have underlined in this article can be related to counter-hegemonic narratives that have developed in the Pacific region in the past 30 years, and that have been further reinforced by the awareness of the existential risk that the ecological crisis poses to the region. On the occasion of the above mentioned 50th PIF, hosted by Tuvalu, regional leaders decided to develop a "2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent" (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, 2019). The idea of Oceania as a "Blue Continent" draws from Epeli Hau'ofa's description of the region as an essentially relational space, shaped by the legacy of a time "when boundaries were not imaginary lines in the ocean, but rather points of entry that were constantly negotiated and even contested" (Hau'ofa, 1994: 154-155). According to the Tongan anthropologist and writer, the ocean, which the colonial gaze saw as a water barrier between scattered islands, represents instead a space of connection that enabled Pacific societies to keep in communication for centuries. Beyond the Westphalian grid of states and territories that was superimposed on the world of Oceania, an older set of relations – both friendly and conflictual – survives and keeps shaping political and ecological presents. It is towards that half-submerged world that this article has turned to, highlighting Tuvaluan political dynamics that escape mainstream understandings of sovereignty, with the purpose of showing – in ethnographic fashion – that statehood, an institutional setting of

European origin and colonial heritage, was not passively received in Oceania, but rather appropriated and strategically reshaped.

These observations show the dense knot of implications that the specific case of Tuvaluan sovereignty presents, as well as the many vectors along which its relevance can be generalized. Political theory, even in its critical approaches, has not fully comprised the Pacific region and its variegated political space, which has been often reduced to a naturalistic imaginary or relegated to the role of a repository for exotic exceptions to the norm and prophetic unforeseen scenarios. For this reason, the institutional setting of Oceania lies largely unstudied. The purpose of this article is to show that, while global warming does pose a largely unprecedented and potentially existential threat to the region and its inhabitants, this cannot be understood but in the context of Oceania's unique institutional and political landscape. If it is to escape the risk of epistemic vagueness and political vacuity, the debate on the ecological crisis in the Pacific and its political consequences need solid ethnographic groundings and attentive care for the specificity of local contexts.

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