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4 Heteroglossic Discourses on Nukulaelae Spirits

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Nukulaelae is a very small atoll (449 acres) in the southern region of a chain of nine islands called Tuvalu, today a nation-state of 9,000 inhabitants on the boundary of Polynesia and Micronesia. Nukulaelae islanders speak a dialect of Tuvaluan, a Polynesian language, and make a subsistence living, mostly in swamp-taro cultivation, reef and ocean fishing, pig husbandry, and coconut-sap tapping. The local economy has long been partially monetized, although the importance of money has increased dramatically in the last two decades. In the absence of local cash-generating resources, islanders seek employment elsewhere: in the government bureaucracy in the national capital, Funafuti; on phosphate-rich Nauru Island in Micronesia; and on merchant ships owned by Hong Kong and German companies who find in Tuvalu a source of very cheap nonunion labor. Even though the atoll is visited by a ship only about ten times a year, Nukulaelae islanders travel widely. The most popular destination is Funafuti, where the largest expatriate Nukulaelae community resides. Almost all Nukulaelae islanders adhere to a nominally Congregationalist brand of Christianity, initially introduced by a London Missionary Society teacher from Samoa in the 1860s. A chiefly system is in place in which the chief presides over a Council of Elders, but these institutions are alleged to be recent reconstructions of an ancient political system and coexist, often uneasily, with a fierce spirit of egalitarianism (Besnier *In Press*).

Nukulaelae was first sighted by Westerners in 1821, but significant contacts were rare until the latter part of the eighteenth century. Very little is known about Nukulaelae society before that time. Traumatic transformations between the

1860s and 1890s account for much of this dearth of knowledge. Peruvian slave traders raided the atoll in 1863 and made off with 70 to 80 percent of the population (see Besnier *In Press*). All victims of the raid perished abroad within a few years, taking with them most of Nukulaelae's historical memory.

Nukulaelae's precontact cosmology and religious practices are especially obscure. What can be gleaned on the subjects from journals of missionaries (who rarely visited the islands for more than a few hours a year and can hardly be considered unbiased observers) suggests that Nukulaelae people may have practiced an ancestor cult involving the skulls of forebears. Supernatural beings apparently were manifested in events like lightning and shooting stars and were iconized in the shape of unworked stones. Spirit mediums, called *vaka atua* (literally, "vessel of god(s)," sometimes referred to as *taulaaitu*, a post-missionization borrowing from Samoan), are said to have functioned as religious practitioners, engaging in prescience, divination, and communication with the spirits of dead individuals, probably paralleling the patterns found in pagan and early Christian Tikopia (Firth 1967, 1970).

Cultural categories such as spirits frequently present complex analytic problems for anthropological description. In most cultural contexts, spirits are liminal entities, whose ambiguous social status poses problems for cultural accounts of self and personhood. In many Pacific societies, spirits dwell in the outer regions of culture, making them particularly inaccessible to the inquisitive probing of outsiders. Not only are they encountered in geographical and temporal margins, such as the bush, the beach, and nighttime, but they are linked with areas of social life that are least controlled and systematized. When anthropologists finally get a grip on the spirit world of their hosts, they often find that their informants talk about spirits only with embarrassment and reluctance, and lack a collective cover story on the topic.

In short, the world of spirits and the cultural processes with which it is associated (e.g., mediumship, possession, sorcery) are fraught with ambiguity, contradiction, and shiftiness of a kind for which traditional models of cultural anthropology, with their emphasis on structure and coherence, are ill-prepared. Based on this case study in a Polynesian atoll society, I demonstrate that spirits and their world cannot be understood through a search for a *resolution* of such ambiguities and contradictions; rather, these qualities must be perceived as constitutive of the very nature of spirits.

The 350 inhabitants of Nukulaelae take great interest in spirits. Few performances captivate the attention of Nukulaelae audiences more than the dramatic, suspense-ridden account of an encounter with a strange creature in the bush in the dead of night. No rumor can damage a person's reputation as effectively as an allegation of conniving with spirits through sorcery. In appropriate contexts, episodes of spirit mediumship and possession are discussed with great gusto. Yet, while they are talked about a great deal, spirits manifest themselves only rarely to Nukulaelae islanders. Much of what people on the atoll know

about spirits comes from narratives of encounters that take place in foreign lands. The spirit world is underdetermined in Nukulaelae *experience*, insofar as Nukulaelae people interact with the world of spirits only under very special circumstances. At the same time, the world of spirits is overdetermined in Nukulaelae *discourse*, where spirits play an important role in everyday talk, in cultural models, in many social processes, and, most generally, in the institutionalization of the notion of truth on the atoll. In this chapter, I describe and attempt to explain the disjunction between the experiential underdetermination and the discursive elaboration of Nukulaelae spirits. I argue that both the lack of firsthand experience with spirits and the fluorescence of discourse about spirits are symptomatic and definitional of the nature of Nukulaelae spirits.

My argument rests principally on an examination of how Nukulaelae people talk about spirits, and on a search for what verbal representations say about local models of their nature: what they are made of, what they do, how they manifest themselves, and how their presence and actions articulate with other symbolic categories and social processes. This choice of focus is in large part determined by what Nukulaelae has to offer; indeed, there is very little to know about Nukulaelae spirits independently of what Nukulaelae discourse can reveal. In such a situation, representation is largely coterminous with the object of scrutiny. I am less concerned here with actual social practices surrounding the presence and actions of spirits than with how these are represented in narratives. In particular I draw attention to details foregrounded in spirit discourse recurrently and across contexts.

One does not find on Nukulaelae a well-articulated, institutionalized set of beliefs and expectations on the nature and role of spirits like that described for many cultures of Melanesia (e.g., Knauff 1985b) and Africa (e.g., Lambek 1981), among others. Rather, Nukulaelae discourse about spirits and the processes and contexts with which they are associated are *heteroglossic*, namely, consisting of a multiplicity of competing and sometimes mutually incompatible voices. Heteroglossia manifests itself in various ways. The qualities that discourse attributes to spirit actions are themselves heteroglossic; for example, spirits usually speak foreign languages, and their manifestations in settings like mediumship sessions feature several voices (e.g., the medium's and the spirit's voices) competing for the floor. In addition, Nukulaelae talk about spirits is framed so as to allow speakers to weave subtly in and out of "believing." Thus heteroglossia operates on several levels at once. I argue that heteroglossia is particularly important in understanding the social roles that spirits play in the community, and further, that the heteroglossic nature of Nukulaelae spirits requires a theoretical approach that recognizes culture as a battleground between conflicting voices.

CATEGORIES OF SPIRITS

The generic term for "spirit" in the Nukulaelae dialect of Tuvaluan is *agaaga*.¹ The same term is also used to refer to the soul of a living or dead person, in a

Christian sense. Nukulaelae people are wont to elaborate on the relationship between spirits that are said to roam the bush and the souls of dead persons, and they do see the two as associated with different epistemologies. From early childhood, they are told in no uncertain terms that there is no room for the former type of spirits in the dominant Christian epistemology of the atoll community. The Christian religion has the potential to cancel the effectiveness and relevance of spirits (although not necessarily their existence, as will be discussed below).

The relevance of spirits to the lives of Nukulaelae islanders is not a simple question. The most simplistic form that this question can take is whether Nukulaelae people believe in spirits, ignoring for the moment the complexities that the notion of "belief" entails (see Howard, chapter 6). "Belief" translates roughly as *talitonu*, a borrowing from Samoan, with strong Christian connotations, like other borrowings from Samoan.² A belief system (e.g., a set of religious doctrines and, by extension, a religion) is referred to as a *talitonuga*, the nominalized form of *talitonu*. The word is conspicuous in metatalk about spirits, as the following typical excerpt from an ethnographic interview illustrates:³

A te tokoukega i te fema teenei, toko uke eeloo e talitonu eeloo paa ki agaaga, me e isi eeloo ne agaaga. Kae isi ne tino, see fakatalitonu nee laaton, paa, me e isi ne agaaga.

[L&S 1991:2:A:024-028]

The majority [of people] on this atoll, many people very much *believe* in spirits, [believe] that there are indeed such things as spirits. But there are people who don't *believe*, like, that there are such things as spirits.

Thus one is not dealing with a consensual belief system, but rather with a model whose validity is open to disagreements and conflicting interpretations in the community. Indeed, the above quote is both an indication of lack of consensus and an example of how talk about spirits is permeated by conflictual oppositions of various types. In this particular example, the implied opposition between "they" and "we" is striking, although conflicts in spirit discourse are not limited to disagreements between various members of the community over whether or not spirits exist; rather, they pervade many levels of Nukulaelae spirit discourse.

When the existence and relevance of spirits are recognized to have some validity, a loose distinction is made between more "permanent" spirits and those associated with a recently dead person, which may or may not be a manifestation of the dead person's Christian soul. Unlike the spirits of dead people, more permanent spirits may have names of their own and are often referred to generically as *Te Lasi*, literally, "The Big One," or *Saumaiafi* (sometimes *Saumaiafe*), a Tuvaluanized form of its Samoan name, *Sauma'iafe*. Permanent spirits manifest themselves periodically over much longer periods of time and are suspected

to have much more power and more malevolent intentions than the second category of spirits. They are also much more mobile and volitional than spirits of the second type, and may manifest themselves under many different guises, whereas spirits of the dead typically have the same physiognomy as the dead person with whom they are connected. Spirits associated with the dead typically manifest themselves *right after* death around the fresh grave or at places frequented by the person while alive.

In contrast, permanent spirits frequently appear *prior* to a death. Nukulaelae people interpret the sudden appearance of a spirit as a warning that someone is about to find him- or herself in a life-threatening situation. Yet the spirit and the human victim are often not connected. This behavioral difference reflects an implicit distinction between permanent and circumstantial categories of spirits, albeit one not reflected in Nukulaelae terminology, and neither strongly elaborated nor consistently clear in discourse.

Spirits may manifest themselves as tangible entities, or in dreams, although the latter experiences are received with more skepticism than sightings of "real" spirits. Spirits also may manifest themselves through unexplainable events, such as loud noises, shuffling in the vegetation, or unusual and localized weather patterns such as dark whirlwinds. Spirit presences are associated with a feeling of intense fear (*mataku*); as I illustrate below, spirits have a stake in inducing fear in humans. As tangible entities, spirits can take a variety of forms. Descriptions of the physical appearance of spirits commonly are replete with superlatives (e.g., *maattugaa* "enormous," *kkii* "very," *silia* "to surpass"); spirits are frequently enormous, or, less often, minuscule (*tamaa* "tiny"):

Maattugaa tino, e lasi kkii, kae silia mo te faamalama.

[L 1991:1:A:231-232]

An enormous person, it was very big, surpassing [in height] the window [through which I saw it].

Naa laa, i a- au e puke atu paa ki ei, [. . .] ana tamaa vae ne tamaa mea! E paakkaa fua! Teenaa, kaa poi ei au, kae fai au me se mea- paa me se mea fakaautea.

[L 1991:1:A:179-181]

Then I- I grabbed it like this, [. . .] his tiny legs were just tiny things! So thin! And I was about to get startled, thinking that it was something- like something out of the ordinary.

The complexion of spirits is often extremely dark (hence ugly and scary) or, less commonly, noticeably pale. Spirits are usually adults, often frighteningly old, and more likely to be women than men. They sometimes also manifest themselves as babies, as land animals (pigs, dogs, and cats, which just about exhausts all Nukulaelae faunal possibilities), or as one of the more ferocious creatures of the sea (e.g., large sharks and moray eels). They have an uncanny ability to

change appearance quickly, sometimes during the same apparition. Recurrent themes in spirit narratives are the invisibility of parts of the spirit's body, and witnesses' difficulties in making out the spirit's features. For example, in several narratives, spirits face away from human witnesses, even when they are talking to them.

Spirits are powerful; they can kill people, usually by strangling, smothering, suffocating, or "eating" them. They often appear as attractive women to young men, whom they seduce and ultimately smother in an isolated place (e.g., on a fishing canoe at sea). Spirits are also capable of human feelings. They are often angry (*kaitana*) and prone to being offended and retaliating (compare Gordon, chapter 4). They get particularly angry when they perceive that someone is not afraid (*mataku*) of their authority. However, spirits are also capable of feeling *alofa*, "empathy," toward humans, and this emotion sometimes restrains their destructiveness.

It is difficult to talk about spirits on Nukulaelae without bringing up the topic of sorcery. What I call sorcery here is a complex category termed *vai laakau*, literally, "liquid [or water or juice] of vegetable substance."⁴ This term straddles several related areas of meaning on Nukulaelae, as on neighboring Nanumea (Chambers and Chambers 1985). In its least morally marked sense, *vai laakau* refers to Western medicines like aspirin and antibiotics. It may refer to local pharmacopoeia and practices designed to improve the health of its recipients (e.g., oils for rubbing, infusions to be taken internally). In its most morally marked sense, *vai laakau* refers to substances, and practices using substances, that have the power to change the normal course of events so as to benefit the designs of the practitioner at the expense of the community at large (euphemistically, *taafao ki mea maassei*, literally, "to play with bad things"). These substances are usually liquid infusions of herbs, barks, and juices (and thus are commonly referred to with the euphemism *fagu*, "bottle") used for a whole panoply of purposes: killing enemies; increasing one's success in fishing and erotic pursuits, prescience and divination; and ensuring victory for soccer teams from one's home island in Tuvalu's national tournaments.⁵ The boundary between morally marked and unmarked *vai laakau* is blurred: people suspect that individuals who know how to concoct morally unmarked *vai laakau* also know how to make the bad stuff. Furthermore, morally unmarked ends, e.g., the curing of a disease, can sometimes be arrived at through recourse to "bad" *vai laakau*; for example, arthritis, a common ailment on the atoll, can be cured with exorcism, magical potions, and secret formulas.

Spirits come into play in *vai laakau* in at least two major ways. First, spirits often talk about *vai laakau*. For example, spirits typically visit mediums to make bold accusations of *vai laakau*. Second, *vai laakau* cannot be potent without the intervention of spirits. In order to "play" with *vai laakau*, a sorcerer must first call (*kalaga*) a spirit, without whose power *vai laakau* is ineffectual. Conversely, in their most prescriptive moments, Nukulaelae islanders state that spirits

only manifest themselves to owners of "bottles." However, the very same people who make such prescriptive statements also admit to spirit encounters, while denying categorically any involvement in *vai laakau*.

Spirits always demand a *taui*, "price, retribution, compensation" (a Samoan borrowing), for their assistance. Typically, this takes the form of a misfortune: childlessness, crippling disease, or a handicapped offspring. Certain misfortunes are associated with particular types of *vai laakau*; for example, one of the dangers of using *vai laakau* for erotic purposes is that it can unwittingly affect a close relative, thus leading one to commit incest, one of the worst transgressions in this society. Such compensations are most immediate when a person dabbles in *vai laakau* that does not belong to his or her family. (Like most knowledge, knowledge of *vai laakau* is the property of particular descent groups.)

Spirits manifest themselves in two other important contexts, namely spirit mediumship (*fakalleo*, literally, "to give [someone] a voice") and possession (*pukea* or *ulufia*, a Samoan borrowing).⁶ Briefly, a spirit enters (*ulu*) the body and mind of the medium or possessed person and takes over its "normal" human functions, particularly its voice, leaving the medium or possessed person in a trancelike state. As Firth (1964:247–8, 1967:296) found in Tikopia, Nukulaelae islanders characterize possession as an essentially involuntary event, and hence a kind of sickness (*masaki*) that can be cured with *vai laakau*; in contrast, mediumship is a voluntarily induced state during which the spirit is called (*kalaga*) to enter the body of the medium. Yet agency in mediumship does not rest with the medium; the spirit's caller is always someone other than the medium, usually a relative of higher status than the medium (e.g., an older man), who hence has some degree of control over the medium's actions.⁷ Crucially, the words and actions of mediums are intelligible and interpretable, while those of possessed persons are not; in mediumship, "the accent is on communication" (Firth 1964:248). While the two events are not always distinguishable—mediums are prone to possession—together they comprise the quintessential contexts in which spirits and humans interact and are the most compelling evidence of the existence and power of spirits.

Mediumship and possession activities are seen as antithetical to Christian teachings, and because Christianity is the overarching reference scheme for morality, communicating with spirits is regarded as profoundly immoral. Semiotic tokens of Christianity, such as the simple presence of a Bible, can exorcise spirits from mediums and possessed persons. Spirit-related altered states of consciousness on Nukulaelae thus are associated with radically different moral evaluations from those described for many African contexts. For example, here we have none of the playfulness, social legitimacy, and institutionalization that characterize spirit possession among Mayotte Comorans (Lambek 1981).

In contrast to other islands of Tuvalu, Nukulaelae itself has very few incidents of mediumship or possession; these events most commonly are witnessed off the atoll, giving them a foreign flavor.⁸ Because of the strong negative sanc-

tions associated with voluntary dabbling in spirit mediumship on Nukulaelae, possession is more frequent than mediumship. In the last two decades, mediumship or possession episodes were reported for only about a half-dozen people, including a man in his early twenties, a young child, an older woman, and a highly marginalized young woman who died in 1986. During my three-odd years of field work on the atoll, spread over more than a decade, I witnessed only one case of possession, which took place at a dance performance. The possessed person was the marginalized young woman to whom I refer above, who was at the time the only person in recent memory to have been subject to possession repeatedly and chronically; her episodes drew little attention, other than annoyance. Yet mediumship and possession episodes that take place on other islands, particularly the most accessible, the capital Funafuti, are discussed with enormous interest. Indeed, mediumship episodes that take place on Funafuti are made relevant to Nukulaelae life; while in temporary residence there, many Nukulaelae people attend mediumship sessions to elicit from spirits explanations of events on Nukulaelae. Thus suspicions of *vai laakau* activities are confirmed, new accusations arise, unexplained deaths are explained, and the future or secret deeds of particular Nukulaelae islanders are revealed. These accounts are quickly reported when witnesses return to the atoll, and can become the central focus of gossip and rumor for quite some time.

HETEROGLOSSIA IN SPIRIT DISCOURSE

Such was the case in 1990 and 1991, when a young Funafuti woman named Suunema, recently abandoned by her husband, embarked on a major series of mediumship episodes, from which most of my data on mediumship are drawn. Suunema's mediumship had a significant impact on Nukulaelae social relations, which became a major focus of my 1990 field work. The details are very involved, and a complete account is beyond the scope of this discussion. Suffice it to say that Suunema was the host of Saumaiafi (sometimes Saumaiafe), a powerful female spirit from Samoa who also appears in Samoan spirit discourse (see Mageo, chapter 2). According to Nukulaelae narrators, Saumaiafi, through the medium of Suunema, was able to tell who had killed whom, who had performed love magic on whom, and where lost keys and watches could be found. Nukulaelae narrators invariably talked about the last item as particularly powerful evidence that the medium was not faking her episodes.

A characteristic of Saumaiafi mediumship that Nukulaelae narratives consistently emphasize is the foreign quality of everything that concerns the spirit and her manifestations. This foreignness is highlighted in several ways. First, the mediumship sessions take place on a different atoll, among the bright lights and accompanying moral depravity of Funafuti. Saumaiafi claims to have gone to and been able to land at all atolls and islands of Tuvalu, with the exception of Nukulaelae:

A: *Ana pati a ia heki vau eiloo kkonei, te fenua nei, vvela, vvela! Ana pati, "Taapaa! Te fenua teelaa, peelaa eiloo me he afi!" A ia kaa vau, a ia palele eiloo te lalolagi. Ana pati, "Au palele te lalolagi!" Vau ia ki Tuvalu nei, kaa-mata mai ia i Soofaea, oko ki Nanumea, a ia e fano saale aka eiloo ki uta i fenua katoa, me e isi sena taugaasoa. Kae i Nukulaelae, heei beana taugaasoa i ei. Teelaa laa, a ia kaa hanaka, hee ana mauaga (ia) ki uta i te-te vvela. Teelaa laa, taku fakattau kaati hee- heki tuu eiloo kkonei. Kae hee iloo, hee iloo atu laa maafai ne vau, kae hee iloo atu!*

[Saumaiafi 1990:1:A:229-239]

A: She said that she has not been here, [because] this atoll is very, very hot! She said, "Wow! That atoll, it's just like a fire!" When she wanted to come, she had [already] been everywhere in the world. She said, "I've been everywhere in the world!" When she came to Tuvalu, she started with Sophia Island [i.e., Niulakita], all the way up to Nanumea, on every other island she was able to land, because she had friends [on each island]. But on Nukulaelae, she had no friends. So when she [tried to] land, she couldn't stand the heat. So I think that she hasn't- hasn't been here. But who knows, who knows if she's been here, but nobody knows about it!

The convenient geographical distancing of the mediumship sessions and the spirit herself places them well outside the tight moral control of tradition and church on Nukulaelae, but of course does not prevent Nukulaelae people from making full use of the medium's services while visiting Funafuti and from reporting in great detail what the spirit said upon their return home. In fact, the extraterritorial locus of mediumship sessions legitimizes their use by Nukulaelae people: narratives of mediumship sessions legitimize their use by Nukulaelae people: narratives of mediumship sessions can confirm, among other things, the outlandishly immoral nature of life on Funafuti, where such "heathenish" (*pouliuli*, literally, "dark"; a Samoan borrowing) practices as spirit mediumship are allowed to take place.

Second, Saumaiafi, as mentioned above, is from Samoa. Nukulaelae people, like all other Tuvaluans, are familiar with many features of Samoan culture, including the Samoan language, which for many decades was the language of church and government. But their acquaintance with Samoans themselves is generally secondhand, and many Samoan things stand out as highly marked in Tuvaluan contexts, despite massive borrowings since missionization. So when Suunema, the medium inhabited by Saumaiafi, begins her mediumship session by performing a dance Samoan style, which Tuvaluans find particularly graceful, this event becomes highly centralized in every narrative:

Paa eeloo me ne vau i Samoa! Te poto i te saka!

[L. 1991:1:A:277-278]

It's just as if she had [just] come from Samoa! That's how good her dancing was!

Third, Suunema-Saumaiafi never speaks in Tuvaluan during mediumship episodes. Although she sometimes employs other languages, her favorite language is

Samoan, and when she speaks Samoan, *Se tinaa Saamoa eeloo!*, "She's a quintessential Samoan!" (L 1991:1:A:353–354). For some, the fact that she speaks Samoan as well as a handful of other languages is strong evidence that the mediumship episode is legitimate:

A ko Itaitonuga ki agaaga, e isi eeloo ne agaaga. Te mea e fakatalitonu foki nee au a tino fakalleo, taatonu peenei mo Lina nei, nee?, e ana iloaga o faipati faka-Saamoa. Kaafai e faipati mai, e isi se llave. A ko ttino fakalleo, kaa faipati mai, see iloa nee koe, paa me se tino-. [...] A ttino teelaa fakalleo faka-Saamoa kaa faipati mai, se Saamoa eeloo. Teenaa ssuaa mea e fakatalitonu ei nee au a tino fakalleo, nee?

[L&S 1991:2:B:311–320]

As far as believing in spirits, spirits do exist. The thing that makes me believe spirit-mediums, is, like us here, like Lina [for instance], see?, she knows how to speak Samoan. [But] when she speaks it, she stumbles. But the spirit medium, when she speaks, you don't know [she is not a native speaker], she sounds just like a [foreign] person. The medium, when she speaks Samoan, she's a real Samoan. That's another thing that makes me believe spirit mediums, see?

For others, the same evidence can be turned on its head: Saumaiafi's careful choice of those languages in which Tuvaluans have some competence is a dead giveaway:

A tino foki Nukulaelae ne maafua mai eiloo, me laatonu e poto i te faitauiga o ttusi paia Saamoa, nee? Seei loo laa se kkese o te faipati mo te tusi paia, teelaa e iloa nee koe o faipati a pati Saamoa i loto, nee? Seei loo se kkese. Koe e iloa foki nee koe o faipati, e iloa nee koe, iaa koe e faitau oki i pati kolaa, ttusi paia ne pati Saamoa, seei ne pati.

[L&S 1991:2:A:138–144]

Nukulaelae people, from the very beginning, they knew how to read the Samoan Bible, see? There is absolutely no difference between speaking and [reading] the Bible, inside of which you know how to pronounce the Samoan words, see? Absolutely no difference. You just know how to speak, you just know, because you've read those words, the Bible is in Samoan, not in [some other language].

A comparable foreign flavor also permeates many other aspects of Nukulaelae discourse about spirits, spirit-related altered states of consciousness, and *vai laakau*. For example, a wide variety of people over the years consistently told me that Nukulaelae islanders know little about *vai laakau*, compared to, say, what is known about it on the northern islands of the group, particularly Nanumea and Niutao. What Nukulaelae people do know about *vai laakau* and the role of spirits in it consists primarily of bits and pieces that they have gleaned from Northern Tuvaluans. In Nukulaelae eyes, it is on those islands that knowledge of the world of spirits and their power is most elaborated, and where the practice of *vai laakau* is given most prominence.

Nukulaelae people who return from extended visits to these islands are often

suspected to have acquired competence in *vai laakau* or at least a *fagu*, "bottle [of potent concoction]." Knowledge of *vai laakau* can also trickle south to Nukulaelae through kinship or adoption ties with other islands of the group, particularly Niutao. These ties are not uncommon, as the 1863 raid by Peruvian slave traders made necessary a pattern of aggressive exogamy to ensure the survival of the atoll's population (Besnier In Press). Because most survivors of the Peruvian raid were women, many men from other islands of Tuvalu (and other parts of the Pacific) came to settle on Nukulaelae, bringing with them their various secret *logo*, "knowledge," which are still transmitted from generation to generation. The *logo* of contemporary Nukulaelae islanders are reputed to be mere fragments of what is known and practiced on other islands of Tuvalu, but their foreign origin is a significant aspect of their socio-cultural value for contemporary Nukulaelae.

The attribution of sorcery to outside sources is not peculiar to this situation; among many groups, positing sorcery as external to the community can reinforce a sense of internal cohesion and a belief in moral superiority over the outside world (Rivière 1970, Forge 1970). Both these explanations are probably valid for Nukulaelae. However, the foreign nature of Nukulaelae spirits, their associated categories and processes, is part of a broader picture in which spirits are embedded in a fundamentally heteroglossic conceptual domain. Heteroglossia, a term I am borrowing from Bakhtin (1981, 1986), refers to the proliferation of voices, a voice being the relationship between utterances and ideology. More often than not, voice proliferation is characterized by conflicts and contradictions between voices. To paraphrase Bakhtin loosely, a voice is never monologic, but is always embedded in a cacophony of other voices.

Heteroglossia manifests itself on many levels in Nukulaelae discourse about spirits. In the most orthodox sense, it characterizes the very definition of mediumship. Mediumship is a competition between the voice of a spirit and the voice of a medium, since the two have only one mouth to speak through. Also involved is the voice of the person in control of the session (the spirit's "caller"), the voices of audience members who interrogate the spirit, the voices of narrators who subsequently broadcast what the spirit said, and, potentially, the voices of individuals whom the spirit accuses of being sorcerers. In addition, spirits themselves take on multiple voices depending on what they have to say:

Niisi taimi, koo ffuli mai faka- o van fakamaatua, nee?, peela mo ko te maatua. [...] (Kae) kaafai e faipati fakamaatua, tena leo e (t)tagi mai eiloo peela me he maatua, nee?, paa, faka-fafine-matua. Faipati fakatamaliki, peela i itamaliki, ttinaa tamaliki!

[Saumaiafi 1990:2:A:114–126]

Sometimes, [Saumaiafi's voice] changes to that of- it comes out like that of a mother, see?, as if she were a mother. [...] When she speaks like a mother, her voice sounds just like a mother's, see?, like an aging woman. She [also] speaks like a child, like when children- she sounds like a real child!

Heteroglossia is thus a central aspect of the dramaturgic ventriloquism that takes place during mediumship. Finally, heteroglossia is manifested in the extraterritorial identity of spirits, their polyglot skills, and their apparition during mediumship sessions. Otherness involves heteroglossia by default, because voices from the outside are always potentially in opposition to native voices. Its most straightforward manifestation is the choice of a foreign language and code switching, a central concern in the case of Saumaiafi.

Heteroglossia is not just a characteristic of spirits and mediumship, but also a major component of discourse *about* spirits and associated categories and processes. Otherness plays a striking role in discourse about spirits, who are commonly represented as relevant only to the lives of "others" (see also Favret-Saada 1980 for comparable statements from rural Normandy). Several illustrations have already been presented here; for example, spirits are frequently said to appear only to owners of sorcery bottles. In other words, encounters with spirits only affect "others."

Spirit encounters are also incriminating events, in that they provide evidence that those involved are responsible for bringing about these events and, by the same token, harbor evil intentions. The contrast between self and other drawn in this discourse establishes a moral order in which the speaker emerges with a clear advantage over "others." In addition, the multiple and contradictory affective stances that Nukulaelae islanders take in spirit narratives are further manifestations of heteroglossia. A Nukulaelae narrator can relate a spirit story with much conviction, drama, and gusto (and audiences of spirit narratives generally display as much fascination for these stories as the narrators themselves) and, at the same time, frame these narratives with expressions of doubt, disbelief, and cynicism. For example, one of my respondents, after narrating story after story of encounters with spirits, concluded with the following remark:

See iloa laa nee au, me see iloa laa nee au me e isi ne agaaga me ikkaai.
[L 1991:1:A:258-259]

[In answering my question, "Do you think it was a spirit that came to visit you that night?"] I don't know, because I don't know whether or not there are such things as spirits.

The resulting effect can be contrasted fruitfully with Butler's analysis of narrative practices in L'Anse-à-Canards, Newfoundland, where "the narrative raises the expectations of the audience, rises to a climax, and then reveals the rational explanation of what initially seemed to be a supernatural encounter" (1990:102). Although Nukulaelae spirit narratives with antithetical codas share some formal features with L'Anse-à-Canards narratives, the latter are strategically geared to discredit other people's beliefs in spirits, and thus are not heteroglossic performances in the way that Nukulaelae narratives are. No comparable intentional ploy underlies the uncertainty and contradictions of Nukulaelae narrative performances.

Vagueness and uncertainty suffuse Nukulaelae spirit discourse across many contexts: interviews with my respondents, casual conversations I overheard, and formal meetings that, for one reason or another, touched on the supernatural. The vagueness and uncertainty are most prominent in interviews, for the obvious reason that the topic is morally charged, and my respondents are reluctant to commit themselves in front of an outsider, however familiar. However, I had the opportunity to interview individuals from other islands of Tuvalu about spirits and sorcery. Even though these topics have roughly the same moral associations on other islands, these individuals (with whom I was considerably less intimate) talked about spirits and *vai laakau* in no uncertain terms and did not mitigate their accounts with conflicting signals, in sharp contrast with my Nukulaelae respondents. Witness, for example, the certainty with which an elderly man from Nanumea, whom I interviewed while he was visiting Nukulaelae, asserts his belief in the existence of both spirits and *vai laakau*:

Me i vai laakau nei laa, fai mai nei laa peela me secai, peela, e see fakamaonigina, nee? A ko toku fakama- toku iloa laa, e tonu iloa mea kolaa. E isi iloa ne vai laakau. [. . .] Kae nei laa, i ttou maaloo laa i te maaloo seki fakamaonigina peela, nee? [. . .] A ko taku iloa laa, se mea tonu kkii. E isi loa ne agaaga.
[T 1991:1:A:420-429]

Because as far as sorcery is concerned, it is said that it doesn't exist, that it's never been proved, right? But I know that *these things* [i.e., sorcery] *are true*. There is *such a thing as sorcery*. [. . .] But then our government, the government has not accepted it, right? [. . .] But I know that *it* [i.e., sorcery] *is a true thing*. Spirits very much exist.

Even though the Nanumea man addresses me here, a complete stranger and a non-Tuvaluan, his assertions display none of the contradictions and ambivalences of Nukulaelae spirit discourse. Hence the conflicting messages that characterize Nukulaelae spirit discourse cannot be explained simply as resulting from a concern to appear detached from the topic in the eyes of an outsider. Rather, these characteristics are indicative of the multivocal texture of spirit discourse, a multivocality that sometimes results in several seemingly conflicting voices being heard at once, or in rapid succession to one another within the same speech event.

Conflicting voices are present in an even more striking manner in talk about belief in spirits (compare Favret-Saada 1980). Below are two excerpts from the same ethnographic interview that illustrate patterns of contradiction extant in such discourse. In the first, the respondent first asserts unequivocally that she does not believe in spirits:

Au laa see talitomu lele loo ki mea naa! See taaitai eeloo o talitomu! Konei taatou nei, e olo saale, e olo saale, kaiaa see vau ei te agaaga ki taatou nei?
[L&S 1991:2:A:413-414]

I absolutely do not believe at all in those things [i.e., spirits]! I am not about to believe [in them]! [Look at] us here, [we] run around, [we] run around, why doesn't a spirit come to us here?

According to this testimony, people who claim to have encountered spirits are not telling the truth. Yet, a few minutes later, she affirms that spirits are selective in their manifestations:

Au e talitonu ki- i agaaga e mafai eeloo o olo ki tino kolaa e kaallaga saale ki agaaga. Kae see mafai o soo naa vau ua kia maatonu kolaa see fiafia atu kiae ia, kae fano eeloo ki tino kolaa e fiafia a ia ki ei o fakataugaasoa ki ei, me ne kalaga atu kiae ia kee vau.

[L&S 1991:2:B:193–198]

I believe in- that spirits can go to people that are in the habit of calling out to spirits. But it [i.e., the spirit] can't come any old way to those of us who are not friendly with it, but it always comes to people who are happy to make friends with it, because they called out for it to come.

Semanticists have long argued that all utterances rest on presuppositions, i.e., unspoken assumptions upon which depend the truth value and felicity of spoken utterances. Presupposition is a complex and heterogeneous semantic category, and its exact nature has been the subject of much debate since Bertrand Russell argued at the turn of the twentieth century that the utterance "The king of France is bald" presupposes that there is a king of France (see Lyons 1977:592–606 for details). Suffice it to say that the last conversational excerpt presupposes, in the most straightforward way, the speaker's belief that spirits do exist. Thus the presupposition of the last quote contradicts the statement that the same speaker made a few minutes before.

Such contradictions cannot be attributed simply to the vagaries and inconsistencies of casual conversation. Indeed, they are associated conspicuously with certain specific topics. An even more striking example is found in the text of a dramatic meeting of the Nukulaelae Council of Elders in June 1991 (for a more detailed account, see Besnier 1993a). This extraordinary meeting was called by a middle-age Nukulaelae man, Pito, who had been accused by Saumaiafi of conspiring with spirits to kill potential contenders for his prestigious post of head (*toeaina*, literally, "elder") of the Nukulaelae community on Nauru. The sudden death of one of his relatives against whom he was alleged to bear a grudge had already "proved," for many people, that Pito was engaged in *vai laakau*; he had also been seen on a deserted beach on Nauru calling out to a spirit, which manifested itself in a dark cloud. Shortly before the meeting, Nukulaelae's Council of Elders had ordered him to resign from his lucrative job on Nauru and to return to Nukulaelae. During the meeting, held a few days after his arrival, Pito made a series of emotionally charged speeches arguing that he knew nothing about *vai laakau*. (Since his social demise was already a *fait accompli*, he was

defending what little there was left, namely his own face and prestige.) Halfway through the meeting, a prominent member of the council, a recently retired pastor with strong political ambitions, stood up and extemporaneously engaged both the Council of Elders and Pito in the following dramatic exchange:

Silo: {falsetto} *Koutou e talitonu ki vai laakau?* (very fast) *Pito, koe e fai vai laakau?*

Pito: *Ikaai!*

Silo: (very fast) *E tii taaua, maafai e tonu koe e fai vai laakau?*

Pito: *See iloa nee au!*

[Fono Taupulega 1991:2:A:301–304]

Silo: [addressing the council, falsetto] You believe in sorcery? [addressing Pito, very fast] Pito, are you a sorcerer?

Pito: No!

Silo: Will you cast a die with me to see if you are a sorcerer?

Pito: I know no such thing!

Silo went on to shame the council, not for believing in *vai laakau*, but rather for admitting, in a thoroughly public context, that such a thing exists:

Tuuvalu e mofo, kae aumai e tasi eiloa te pati, "A Pito ne aumai, e fai vai laakau!"

[Fono Taupulega 1991:2:A:305–306]

[All of] Tuvalu is here [listening], and [you] only say one thing, "Pito was recalled, [because] he's a sorcerer!"

He then made the following statement:

Kae kaafai laa, Pito, e isi eiloa seau mea peela, seau lito e iloa nee koe, kae tavili koe i loto nei me e faipati mai koe, "E seedi," aal, a koe e tai faateete maalie i te Atua.

[Fono Taupulega 1991:2:A:334–336]

But if ever you did do, Pito, such a thing, [if] you know even a tiny bit [literally, a bud] [of sorcery], but you speak in this house, and you say, "No," ah! you had better be a bit careful with God.

Underlying Silo's threat of immanent justice here is the presupposition that *vai laakau* exists, which contradicts his just uttered ridicule of the council for having implied the very same thing. While this case focuses on *vai laakau* rather than spirits, we must remember that accepting the validity and relevance of *vai laakau* presupposes an acceptance of spirits as real, since *vai laakau* cannot work without the mediation of a spirit.

These contradictions permeate discourse about beliefs in spirits, and are yet another way in which spirit discourse is multivocal: the voice of belief coexists with, but contradicts, the voice of disbelief. Manifestations of heteroglossia in this type of discourse belong to an area of analysis beyond the most immediate

features of linguistic representation. When one finds contradictions across utterances and their presuppositions, one is dealing not simply with the literal, referential meaning of linguistic signs but with issues of ideology. I propose that the heteroglossia I have described here is an instance of what Tambiah (1990:92-3) calls "multiple orderings of reality," i.e., the coexistence of diverse "mentalities" (e.g., mystical belief and logico-empirical rationality) in all individuals and cultures.

A possible explanation of these patterns of heteroglossia would attribute them to a contrast between Christianity and a "local" tradition in Nukulaelae culture. The local tradition, the presumed heir of pre-Christian modes of thought, would animate the voice of belief, while Christian doctrine would refute it. Some support exists for this interpretation: dealing with spirits is certainly branded as *pouliuli*, "heathenish," and thus antithetical to Christian thinking. However, while this account might make some sense in other cultures, its simplicity here is suspect. On Nukulaelae, Christianity is "tradition" (Goldsmith 1989), and the two cannot be separated. Furthermore, this model fails to account for other forms of heteroglossia in spirit discourse, such as Saumaiafi's choice of the Samoan language (which incidentally was the language of the church until recently). Clearly, the heteroglossic situation I have described cannot be reduced to some separation of spheres in Nukulaelae society and culture. I will return to the question of explanations later in this chapter.

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HETEROGLOSSIA

One of the major events of 1990 on Nukulaelae was Saumaiafi's sensational confirmation that Lina, a twice-widowed, attractive woman in her early forties, practiced *vai laakau*, something that everyone suspected. This revelation, which Saumaiafi spoke through her usual Funafuti medium, Suunema, explained why this woman's two husbands died under mysterious circumstances, why she was constantly followed by a court of suitors half her age, why she was seen gathering flower buds at dawn in the bush, and a number of other things. (Lina is childless, a condition widely attributed to her involvement in *vai laakau*.) Also implicated was her adoptive sister, who, although much more subdued than Lina, was also twice widowed and attracted much attention from the atoll's men, married and unmarried. Depending on the narrator, the spirit is reported to have said that the latter was either an apprentice to or a victim of her sister's *vai laakau*. The accusation spread like wildfire the instant that the Nukulaelae islanders who had participated in the session with the medium returned to Nukulaelae. (Wasting no time, they began circulating the rumor while they were still wading to shore from the ship that brought them.) This gossip resulted in the two women being severely ostracized for several months. Lina, educated in the school of hard knocks, seemed to fare reasonably well under the circumstances; I would venture that she even drew some personal enjoyment from being in the limelight of these accusations. Her sister, whose sense of identity depends on a much more

traditional role in life, found them extremely distressing; she confided in me at the time that she felt *loto mmae*, literally, "painful heart."

Gossip plays a major role in day-to-day negotiations of prestige and power on the atoll. But this role is far from straightforward because, overtly, Nukulaelae islanders strongly disapprove of gossip (Besnier 1989, 1990a, 1993b, In Press). The predicament they face is how to gossip without appearing to do so. This problem is becoming more serious as Nukulaelae people grow increasingly aware of the possibility of recourse to Western-style legal institutions. (Until recently, Nukulaelae people saw formal law as a compliance-enforcing mechanism, which is indeed what British colonial authorities designed it to be, but this image is rapidly changing to a means of seeking retribution for wrongdoings.) In the late 1980s, the first civil case concerning slander reached the court, setting a dreaded precedent for Nukulaelae islanders, who until then had rarely hesitated to degrade one another by concocting outlandish stories. Already attuned to questions of responsibility, evidence, and attribution, Nukulaelae gossips are becoming painfully aware that their favorite pastime can backlash both symbolically and materially.

Against this background, Saumaiafi's words and deeds were a godsend. Indeed, Nukulaelae participants in the sessions on Funafuti elicited from the spirit slanderous accusations of all kinds, which then could safely be circulated as narratives of what the spirit had said. I do not have recordings of the gossip that Saumaiafi's pronouncements generated on Nukulaelae, but I obtained many retellings. Witness the following narrative by one of the leading rumor-mongers:

Ka ne fai foki loo taku pati peenaa, nee?, taku faipatiiga i konei, au ne faipati foki loo peelaa, "Mea naa ko pati a te agaaga, kae hee hai atu paa kee olo koutou, peelaa, o fakamaasei nee koutou io me aa, a ko pati hua ne llogo ei maatou i pati a te agaaga, nee?" Kae hee hai peelaa ne pati e- e- (paa) iloa atu loo nee taaton ne pati e ttonu, peelaa, ne nmai maatou o fakamatata i konei me ne pati e ttonu. Peelaa, nee? A ko te mea ne faipati e iloa maatou i pati ne llogo i ei, pati katoa loo, mea valevale, nee?, kolaa ne faipatiga nee te agaaga. Peelaa! Peelaa ne nmai maatou o faipati nee maatou i konei, nee?, kae hee hai peelaa ne faipati peelaa me ne mea iloa koo iloa tonu nee maatou ne mea e ttonu, nee? Peelaa.

[Saumaiafi 1990:2:A:239-247]

But this is also what I said [to people on Nukulaelae], see?, what I said here, I also said this, "This is what the spirit said, but I'm not telling you so that you can go, like, for you to go and denigrate or whatever, but this is just what we heard the spirit had said, see?" And these words are not as if we- we-, like, we knew that these words are true. Like that, see? And all we did was to repeat what we had heard, everything we'd heard, all sorts of things, see?, that the spirit had said. Like that! Like what we said here when we came here, right?, it's not as if we presented these words as words that we know are true, right? Like that.

The narrator exploits heteroglossia in at least four ways. First, by simply quoting what the spirit says, he divulges the *vai laakau* accusations while standing on firm ground. The accusation is attributed to the spirit, not to him as narrator. Second, by engaging in shifting dialogue about belief and nonbelief, he shifts responsibility for giving credence to the accusation onto his interlocutor. Third, he attributes beliefs in spirits to "others." Witness the following striking excerpt from the same conversation:

Tiou fenua oki laa kaati hee lotou iloaga a uiga o te oloaga o pati, nee?
[Saumaiafi 1990:2:A:226–227]

This island of ours, they just don't pay attention to what they say, you see?
[Literally: "This island of ours, they just don't know the meaning of the way in which words go, see?"]⁹

The real culprit is thus a generic, third-person plural entity, i.e., unspecified members of the island community ("You *know* how they can be!"), who spread rumors about spirit mediumship, thereby tacitly endorsing the validity of spirits and admitting their belief in them. Ultimately, if the victims of Saumaiafi's accusations and subsequent rumors become angry, which indeed happened in this case, their anger can be construed as an indication that *they* believe in spirits. In turn, this can be belittled as an indication of lack of *maafaufau*, "maturity of mind, thoughtfulness," and as giving legitimacy to something that should not be legitimized. Following is a superb example of this reasoning (the fact that the entire narrative is in reported dialogue form further complicates the heteroglossic tangle):

Fanatu a Eesau. "Fitu! Koe laa naa kai logo?" Aku pati, "Kae aa?" "Ae- a- isi ne tino koo iita!" Iita ki maaton konei ne mmai, nee? Aku pati, "A tino konaa kaafai e iita, kaati see iloa nee laaton o maafaufau." Aku pati kia Eesau, nee? Muma a- aku pati kia Eesau, mo Faavae eeloo, laaua toko lua, aku pati, "Kiloko! Ttino poto i tena maafaufau, taaton hee talittonu ki mea konei! Mea konei e faipati sua nee taaton, me ne pati ne fai i ttaimi ne tupu i ei te mea, nee? Teelaa, ne laumaiga nee te mea teelaa, teelaa laa, mmai mo taaton, faipati sua nee taaton i konei. Kae see fai peelaa ne mmai eiloo mo taaton, fai nee taaton, peelaa, ee?"
[Saumaiafi 1990:2:A:372–381]

Eesau came to me [and said,] "Fitu! Have you heard?" I said, "What now?" [She said,] "Some people have gotten angry!" Angry at those of us who came back [from Funafuti], see? I said, "If those people get angry, it's probably because they don't know how to *think properly*." That's what I told Eesau, see? I said- I said to Eesau, and to Filemoni, both of them, I said [to them], "Look now! Those of us who've got an *intelligent mind* don't believe in these things! These things we've told because these are what was said while [spirit-mediumship] was taking place, right? Like, that's what [that spirit] said, so that's what we said when we got here. So it's not as if we had brought these words here, as if we stood behind those words, like that, right?"

These masterfully subtle shifts in what Goffman (1979) calls "footing," which rob the victims of any due process, hinge crucially on the multiplicity of voices associated with spirit discourse. Narrators capitalize on this multivocality to disparage others while safeguarding their entitlement to narrate a good story.

Heteroglossia has consequences not just for the social uses of discourse about spirits, but also for the social relationship between the medium, the spirit, and the many people about whom the spirit makes allegations. Over the course of time, Saumaiafi talked about a great many people from Nukulaelae and elsewhere. But the attribution of responsibility for her allegations is tricky business. When Pito, the Nukulaelae man accused of having performed *vai laakau* on Nauru, went to confront the medium (clutching in his hand a letter threatening to take her to court if she did not retract the accusation), this is what he encountered:

Taa, fakamolemole atu kiasa ia, ia ia see iloa nee ia. Mea konaa ko ana pati e fai maafai a ia e ulufia nee te agaaga. A kaafai ia e nofo peenei, see masaua nee ia.
[L 1991:1:A:365–366]

So she apologized to him, [saying] that she did not know [anything]. These were words she uttered while she was possessed by the spirit. But when she's just sitting there, she doesn't remember [anything].

Even more dramatic is the case of a Funafuti man, Manu. During another mediumship session, Saumaiafi had accused him of engaging in *vai laakau*, attributing a foot ailment he was suffering to his having hurt himself when, out of exasperation (*ffiu*) with his constant calls (*kalaga*) to her, she had pushed him off his bed. A furious Manu came to confront the medium. Unfortunately for him, he found her in the middle of a mediumship session. Consequently, he got to speak to the spirit but not to the medium:

Manu vau, tuu mai tua, mo koo pati maasei nee ia te agaaga, mo koo (). Kae muma a te agaaga taa, "Koe- koe see mataku i au?" Kae fai mai paa, "E aa?, koo llei tou kaaiga? Ka koo ita mai koe- kaa ita mai koe kia au?" Teelaa, mo koo fai paa Manu, "Ne aa igoa o aku mea ne fai atu kiasa koe?" Kae fai mai te agaaga paa, "Au koo ffitu ia koe i te kalaga ssoko atu kee vau au, i- kee fai te aavaga a tau tama, kee fai- kee fai te tiimu a Funafuti."

[L 1991:1:A:434–439]

Manu came along, stood outside, and started insulting the spirit, because (). And the spirit said, "You, aren't you afraid of me?" And she said, "So, [rhetorically] your kin group is fine? And you are angry, you are angry at me?" So Manu said, "What did I do to you [to deserve this]?" And the spirit said, "I've had it with your calling out to me for me to come and get your daughter married, to make- make Funafuti's [football] team [win]."

In this encounter, Manu is interested in talking to the medium, to whom the question, "What did I do to you [to deserve this]?" is most likely to be

addressed. But he is forced to converse with the spirit inhabiting the medium at the time. The ensuing tragi-comedy of errors is a direct result of the multivocal nature of mediumship. Later on, when Manu returned to see Suunema, threatening her, like Pito, with a lawsuit, the medium gave him the same answer as his predecessor: "Hey! I have no idea that I said these things! [. . .] When I get to that point, I don't know what I am saying" (L 1991:1:A:441-442). Nukulaelae islanders know that court authorities in Tuvalu do not allow (*talia*) arguments involving spirits and sorcery, but this fact does not lead people to conclude that the medium can be sued for libel; rather, they assume that she is immune from the legal process. The premises implicit in their reasoning rest on the shiftiness of responsibility inherent in mediumship.

Spirits and associated categories and processes provide attractive resources for the manipulation of social relationships, an attractiveness largely attributable to the multivocality of these resources. I propose that areas of culture most suffused with ambiguity and contradiction are privileged as a font of such manipulative resources.

CONCLUSION

Spirits play a very serious role in Nukulaelae social life, even though they rarely appear on the atoll, and despite Nukulaelae islanders' intermittent insistence that they do not exist. They can indeed affect one's personal reputation, social status, and prestige. Ironically, the roles that spirits play crucially depend on the indeterminacy that multiple voices generate.

The arguments I have presented here rest heavily on the analysis of narratives collected in a broad variety of contexts. The nature of my ethnographic data necessitates this orientation. My understanding of Saumaiafi mediumship, to focus on a particularly pertinent example, is limited by the fact that, since I was on Nukulaelae while mediumship sessions were being conducted on Funafuti, I never witnessed one.¹⁰ However, my situation is no different from that of most Nukulaelae islanders, who nevertheless revel in narratives of mediumship sessions and squeeze from them serious consequences for social relations. An approach privileging a view of culture as discourse is particularly relevant to a characterization of Nukulaelae spirits. In addition, while Nukulaelae may appear at first glance an internally homogeneous cultural microcosm isolated from the rest of the world, an image that the islanders themselves like to project, spirit discourse highlights the degree to which Nukulaelae society and culture are involved in a complex network of social relations and cultural processes that extend beyond the confines of the atoll. Indeed, the spirits that affect Nukulaelae, and their various manifestations, have an interesting way of interweaving social action on Nukulaelae with what takes place in other parts of the group, particularly Funafuti.

As many social theorists have argued, human beings constantly engage in making sense of their symbolic world, and this process informs and shapes their social

action and their interpretations of other's actions. This process of making sense is what we hear when we direct why-questions to our respondents and when we overhear them passing judgment on one another's actions. I have adopted a stance here presupposing that the process of making sense is not separate from the symbolic world in which people live, but rather is constitutive of it (i.e., it both shapes and reflects); the process is an integral component of this world of symbols. More often than not, cultural models that members of a particular group present are theoretical distillations of cultural processes. The process of distillation, the results of which I have termed discourse, is precisely what is of interest, particularly when the picture it yields is as complex, shifting, and conflictual as in the case I have investigated here. (Perhaps anthropologists should be more worried about simplicity than complexity in what they are told and overhear.) Of course, heteroglossia is not always easy to spot and understand, particularly if one holds a view of culture as an internally coherent and consistent system. For example, I have shown that heteroglossia may reside not in the literal meaning of people's self-explanations, but in tensions between literal meaning (itself a complex category [Besnier 1990b], particularly across cultural boundaries) and what Tyler (1978) has broadly termed the "unsaid" of discourse, e.g., unstated pre-suppositions. An understanding of these tensions opens the door to comprehending cultural categories and processes.

In the presence of a cultural model whose various aspects contradict one another, and whose nature is context-bound in such a complex manner as to make the description of context very difficult, one is faced with a theoretical problem. As Abu-Lughod (1990, 1991) and others before her (e.g., Clifford 1988) have argued, anthropological explanations in terms of "culture" have all too often suffered from an inherent tendency to find coherence where it doesn't exist. Coherence-seeking cultural explanations are not well equipped to deal with seemingly conflictual meanings in a people's accounts and actions. Instead, an approach centralizing discourse as the organizing key of people's lives and understandings yields more fruitful results in situations where explanations are multiple, mutually contradictory, and shifting (Abu-Lughod 1990). Rather than seeking a resolution in the contradictions presented by these materials, one should seek an understanding of the contradictions themselves, and of how these contradictions articulate with other aspects of society and culture.

NOTES

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- 1 Reflexes of other common Polynesian terms for supernatural entities are also found in this language. The Samoan borrowing *aitu* is sometimes used to mean "spirit" in its non-Christian sense. *Atua* refers to the Christian God or to pagan gods in the Biblical sense (e.g., "false gods").
- 2 In Samoan, the word can be etymologized as *tali*, "to accept, to receive" and *tonu*, "true, correct." The question of whether this etymology has any psychological reality for Nukulaelae people is very difficult to answer. Even if it does, it would simply shift the problem from understanding Nukulaelae notions of "belief" to understanding Nukulaelae notions of "truth."
- 3 Transcript excerpts quoted in this paper follow a phonemic orthography, in which double graphemes indicate geminated segments; geminated oral stops are heavily aspirated, and other geminated phonemes are articulated for a longer period of time than their ungeminated equivalents. The letter *g* represents a velar nasal stop, *l* is a central flap, and all other letters have their approximate IPA value. The transcripts represent an unedited rendition of what is audible on tapes, including false starts, repairs, etc.; however, volume, tempo, and voice quality are not indicated here. Parentheses indicate conjectured or inaudible strings, [...] indicates that a string of words has been left out of the transcript, and material provided in square brackets in a translation represent additions, for the sake of intelligibility, that are not present in the original text. Recording references (e.g., [L&S 1991:2:A:024-028]) appear between the original text and its translation.
- 4 I am not claiming that this etymology is relevant to everyday talk about the category. In this discussion, I use the term *vai laakau* in its original form to avoid the straightjacket of an English translation. However, in the translation of cited excerpts, I gloss *vai laakau* as "sorcery" to alleviate the difficulty inherent in following these texts.
- 5 This use of *vai laakau* is the reason why the Samoan spirit Saumaiafi, which I discuss at greater length further on, became involved in the daily affairs of Nukulaelae and Funafuti in 1990. The cultural extension of sorcery to new realms of social interaction is certainly not unique to this society, and militates against the common view that sorcery and social change are in opposition to one another (cf. Fisiy and Geschiere 1991).
- 6 The term *fakaleo* is a complex one. It can take as a grammatical subject a reference to the medium, the spirit speaking through the medium, or the audience, which is "making" the spirit speak through the medium. This grammatical versatility indicates that we should not take its etymology as a causative verb too literally; when Nukulaelae people talk about mediumship, they do not necessarily envisage a situation in which someone is causing someone else to have a voice.
- 7 As Karp (1989:89) demonstrates, both possession and mediumship involve a complex combination of the involuntary and the desired, thus suggesting that one should not bank too much on agency in drawing an analytic distinction between the two.
- 8 I am drawing this contrast both as a description of an ideological stance and as an empirical observation. Nukulaelae people frequently insist that their community is much less prone to deal with spirits than other islands, and their statements

to this effect fit very nicely with the arguments about the foreign nature of spirits that I develop in the next section. In my experience, Tuvaluans from other islands of the group have a different attitude toward spirits than Nukulaelae people; for example, they are generally more willing to acknowledge the presence and relevance of spirits to me, even though I am even more a stranger to them than to Nukulaelae people.

- 9 This framing statement is thick with shifting indexicality, from pronoun use to hedges to syntax.
- 10 At the end of my sojourn in the field in 1991, I could have tried to attend a mediumship session while in transit on Funafuti. However, I decided against it, as Saumaiafi had implicated me as the purported victim of sorcery, and I had made known on Nukulaelae my displeasure with this accusation. (This affair is involved enough to be the topic of an entirely different paper.) I feared that an encounter with the medium might have placed her in a very awkward position.