Literacy and the Notion of Person on Nukulaelae Atoll

Written discourse produced on Nukulaelae atoll of Western Polynesia falls principally in two categories: personal letters and religious sermons. Personal-letter writing is a highly affective communicative context, in which the vulnerable aspects of the person are highlighted. Sermons, in contrast, elaborate authoritarianism and directness. The divergent characteristics of Nukulaelae literacy practices are best understood in terms of their relationship to contexts of use, particularly to the notion of person articulated through them.

In recent years, literacy and its role in society and culture have been given increasing prominence in anthropology and kindred disciplines. While a number of detailed ethnographies of literacy in various cultures and historical epochs have recently been written (e.g., Clanchy 1979; W. Harris 1989; Heath 1983; King 1990; McLaughlin 1987; Scollon and Scollon 1981; Shuman 1986), the anthropology of literacy has been dominated by debates concerning the cross-cultural homogeneity and heterogeneity of literacy as a sociocultural phenomenon. The stance commonly referred to as the “autonomous approach” (often also called, against the wishes of some of its proponents, the Great Divide, or Great Leap, theory) views literacy as an essentially monolithic phenomenon, whose presence in or absence from the communicative repertoire of a particular group has important implications for its social structures, cultural processes, and the cognitive makeup of its members. This view is most clearly articulated, although increasingly mitigated terms, by Goody (1977, 1986, 1987; see also Goody and Watt 1963), and has antecedents in the works of Havelock (1976), Ong (1977, 1982), and others.

The opposite view, which Street (1984) refers to as the “ideological model,” sees literacy as a fundamentally heterogeneous construct shaped by the sociocultural context in which it is embedded. According to the proponents of this model, the consequences of literacy that Goody and others describe are in fact consequences of particular pedagogical traditions (Heath 1983; Scribner and Cole 1981). Shying away from the search for overarching universal consequences deriving from a refined conceptualization of literacy, “ideologists” investigate aspects of the relationship between literacy and other sociocultural dynamics (Street 1984). They maintain that the “value” of literacy in a society is defined by the ideology that surrounds it, the social practices with which it is associated, and the power structures in which reading and writing activities are enacted (Street and Besnier 1992). The ideological model calls for a reassessment of dichotomous or evolutionist models of literacy, such as the one assumed in the autonomous model, in terms of the power structures that underlie it. Rather than viewing the literacy practices associated with Western middle-class-dominated institutions as the apogee of literacy, and most other manifestations of literacy as more or less deficient (or “restricted,” to use the term proposed by Goody 1977), proponents of the ideological model propose that the literacy practices of Western institutions have come to serve as a model for “full,” nonrestricted literacy because of their associations with hegemonic institutions and structures. This...
recognition opens the door for the study of hitherto devalued literacy traditions in their own right. How literacy is culturally defined and how it articulates with other aspects of social life in particular societies become the objects of inquiry for proponents of the ideological model.

Like most current ethnographic accounts of literacy, this article takes as point of departure an ideological stance. Generally speaking, this approach provides a better framework for the ethnographic investigation of literacy than the alternative approach, in that many of the issues that the autonomous framework defines as its object of inquiry are untestable without a sweeping comparative stance (many would argue that they are not testable at all). However, I also recognize the danger that an ideological model runs of focusing on the particular while losing track of the general. Indeed, the model has been justifiably criticized for its emphasis on diversity, sociological determinism, and particularism (Clanchy 1987; Cole and Nicolopoulos 1991; Miyoshi 1988). This study identifies ways in which generalizations can be sought in the study of literacy from an ideological perspective, and ways in which the approach can inform wider comparative concerns.

This article first describes the coexistence of two different literacy practices on Nukulaelae, an atoll of the Central Pacific: the production and consumption of personal letters, and that of written religious sermons. Focusing on the characteristics of written texts of both types and their social contexts, I show that Nukulaelae literacy is complexly interwoven with a number of social processes, including affectivity, local definitions of the person, and gender. The Nukulaelae case suggests areas of social life with which literacy is likely to become associated in incipiently literate societies.

The Setting

Nukulaelae is a small, isolated atoll of the Tuvalu group in the Central Pacific, with 310 Polynesian inhabitants. Its contemporary social structure is one of the least stratified of the Polynesian cultural area (Brady 1970). At the end of the 19th century, Nukulaelae was missionized, principally by Samoan religious teachers trained in the Congregationalist teachings of the London Missionary Society. The first Samoan teacher arrived in 1865, at a time of great social upheaval, when the traditional authority structure seems to have been crumbling, and two years after Peruvian slavers had made away with 80% of Nukulaelae's mid-19th-century population (Maude 1981). The arrival of the first Samoan missionaries, who were unenthusiastic about being sent to such an isolated corner of the world, was quickly followed by the abolishment of the aboriginal political structure and social order. The Samoan teacher either assumed or was bestowed the authority of the chief, and his personal interpretation of the Christian scriptures became a yardstick for the organization of everyday life (Goldsmith 1989a; Munro 1978). Today, social prestige and political authority rest in the hands of various bodies: a watered-down chiefly system comparable to that of Samoa; an Island Council headed by the Island President, institutions established by British colonial authorities in the 1960s; and the pastor (nowadays a Tuvaluan). Depending on the personalities involved and social dynamics between them, the distribution of power fluctuates over time. In all aspects of political, social, and economic life, Nukulaelae islanders foreground an ideology of consensus and equality, which probably has roots in the precontact social order.

Literacy was introduced to Nukulaelae along with Christianity, and thus at a time of accelerated social change, as is typical of the spread of literacy to preliterate societies (Street and Besnier 1992). The Samoan teachers primarily responsible for both processes generally had highly authoritarian and domineering personalities; as I will show presently, this had an impact on the power dynamics underlying certain literacy practices in contemporary Nukulaelae society. Until recently, literacy thrived there with remarkably little outside influence, that is, other than the literacy practices of 19th-century Samoa that were brought to Tuvalu by the Samoan teachers, and about which very little is known.
Scattered historical reports bear witness to Nukulaelae islanders’ initial enthusiasm for literacy, which seems to have gone hand in hand with their reported eagerness to embrace the new religious rituals associated with it. (Of course, this enthusiasm may have received some help in reports by contemporary Westerners, who could not conceive of a world in which literacy, Western technology, and Christianity were not viewed as highly desirable—cf. Brady 1975; Goldsmith 1987b.) Even before learning reading and writing, Nukulaelae people had obtained loose sheets from a Bible, which became prized possessions (Munro 1982). Less than two decades after their initial acquaintance with reading and writing, a visitor to the atoll reported that they were “well educated, [they] can all read, and are most persistent letter writers. No present is more acceptable to them than a few sheets of paper and some pens. . . . We nearly ran out of ink before we got clear of the group” (Bridge 1886:554).

This report is remarkable in the light of the fact that letter writing had little to do with the primary purpose for which literacy was introduced to the atoll in the first place. However, the situation resembles other cases of “spontaneous” transfers of consumption-oriented literacy skills in religious contexts to letter writing in other parts of the world (see, e.g., Ferguson 1987; Scollon and Scollon 1981:54–55). Unfortunately, the processes that led to this transfer cannot be reconstructed, although it is noteworthy that Nukulaelae’s population recovered rapidly from the 1863 encounter with Peruvian slavers, as settlers from other islands of Tuvalu and neighboring island groups were integrated through affinal ties and adoption in the kinship system of the atoll. Many of these new settlers were recruited among the workers of a coconut plantation that was run by a German company on one of Nukulaelae’s islets between 1865 and 1890 and had a disastrous effect on the economic equilibrium of the atoll (Munro, Iosefa, and Besnier 1990). As a result, a complex and cosmopolitan network of kinship ties was established between Nukulaelae and other island groups (such as Micronesian Kosrae, the Marshall Islands, and Kiribati, and the Polynesian Tokelau and Cook Islands), and is still very much alive today. Nukulaelae islanders may have seen in literacy, which was introduced as these events were unfolding, a means through which these ties could be nurtured. Furthermore, after the turn of the century, Nukulaelae and other islands of Tuvalu (cf. Chambers 1983) began exporting laborers to phosphate-rich Ocean Island and Nauru. This alleviated the economic crunch that restricted atoll environments can potentially create, but also increased Tuvalu’s economic dependence on the outside world (Munro 1990). Labor migration, which survives in some forms today, quickly became a major motivation for letter writing in the 20th century.

Literacy today is firmly ingrained in the communicative activities of the inhabitants of Nukulaelae, most of whom are functionally literate. They view the ability to read and write as an important ingredient of personhood: only small children, mentally retarded individuals, and other humans living in poouili “darkness” (a complex state characterized by heathenness, lack of socialization, dirt, and nakedness) are illiterate. The near-universality of literacy skills on the atoll is in harmony with the egalitarian ideology articulated in all arenas of social life.

The communicative contexts in which literacy plays a central role are frequent, but rarely fall outside of a well-defined set. Nukulaelae islanders read the Bible in church and in a few other settings, the Bible and hymnal being the two books that every household owns. 2 They also correspond with relatives and friends in more or less temporary residence elsewhere, compose church sermons to be delivered orally, draw lists of many kinds (e.g., dues, debts, memberships of the numerous committees and clubs), keep accounts for a variety of purposes, write invitations to feasts, weave or embroider names and allegories on mats and pillowcases, take minutes at meetings, and sometimes dictate a will shortly before dying. As elsewhere in Polynesia (Babadzhan 1985), a few men keep records of traditional fishing lore, magical knowledge of various sorts, genealogies, and medical recipes in jealously guarded exercise books called api. Economic conditions and other factors restrict both the production and consumption of a print literacy. Few individuals
on the atoll can afford to subscribe to the Tuvalu government’s bimonthly newsletter, and while some religious tracts of various kinds reach the atoll, little else does. Three languages have close historical or contemporary associations with literacy, only one of which has an independent existence on Nukulaelae outside of literacy. Samoan was the language of religious life and of many literacy activities until the 1950s; English is the language of government, education, and other institutions that, from a Nukulaelae perspective, loom somewhere above the atoll in a great superstructural hierarchy; Tuvaluan is the language of everyday interactions and of most literacy activities. One can therefore speak with authority of a predominantly “vernacular” literacy situation in which the language of reading and writing is autochthonous to the society.

Given this context, my specific concern here lies with the two major literacy practices, letter writing and sermon writing. Both practices are emically identified as two of the most important and frequent uses of literacy (the other two being reading the Bible or hymnal and api writing). They are also the two literacy activities that yield textual materials in which the meaning of literacy can be “read” most transparently (cf. Scribner and Cole 1981:79). These two literacy practices thus occupy a privileged position, both in local evaluation and from an analytic perspective, in the range of Nukulaelae literacy activities, the rest of which will be described elsewhere.

**Personal Letters**

Personal letters, or tusi alofa (literally, “letters of empathy”) are exchanged with relatives and friends in residence on other islands of Tuvalu, in neighboring island groups of the Pacific, or elsewhere. Letters are never sent to strangers. Everyone writes letters, which are addressed to one or two individuals; but, in keeping with Nukulaelae islanders’ egalitarian and consensual orientation, letters are usually written with the expectation that they will be read by many other people. Letters are commonly hand-carried by travelers leaving on the monthly boat. Frequently, travelers entrusted with letters are asked to deliver oral messages identical to that of the letters, to “help” the recipients understand the letters.

Nukulaelae letters are generally more homogeneous as an event than letters in some other social groups (e.g., among American academics, as analyzed by Basso 1974). While some variation exists in the style and content of Nukulaelae letters, which roughly correlates with age and gender, letters generally have one of only four primary social functions, which are easily identified in their texts (the following remarks are based on an analysis of about 250 personal letters from a broad cross-section of the population). First, they are used to monitor economic reciprocity, which involves remittances in cash or kind from contract laborers employed in Nauru or in the main government center, Funafuti (Chambers 1983; Munro 1990). Letters thus frequently thematize giving, asking, obligations, and the writer’s ability or inability to meet demands.

_Tuagaane, kanfai e isi se mea (e) faa fai mai, fai mai. Io me ko ou kaasia i konaa, fai mai, kee saa maagina laa, ia au nei foki ma a maa iaa koe. . . . Kae alofa mai kia au._ [lett517; from a young woman on Nanumaga to her bond brother on Nukulaelae]

_[My] brother, if there is something you want, tell me. Or if one of your relatives over there [wants something], tell me, don’t be ashamed, otherwise I am also going to be too ashamed to ask you. . . . And feel alofa towards me [and be generous towards me]._ Letters are often sent to accompany baskets of food, packages of goods of various sorts, and money. Lists of the contents of accompanying packages are common.

_E faa fakailoa atu kia koulua me koo oti ne avatu nee au te afihi fofoiki mo te toainia ko S. Mea i loto, e tasi te t-shirt lana moana, tasi te sulu solosolo, tasi te suipi, mo fusi ei e tua._ [lett542]

_I want to let you know that I have sent along a small package with the old man S. In it are one blue t-shirt, one striped loincloth, one deck of cards, and two belts._
Second, letter writing is motivated by a need to inform the recipient of family events and personal news. Writers, particularly younger ones, narrate recent events, of which the following is a typical example:

Ia, tala o te malaga a maatou koo oko loa i te maasei. Kaati e lavea loa nee koutou te maasei o te tai. Maatou e tolo u galu ne fiti ki loto i temotou poosi. Teelaa laa, temotou poosi kaati e lavea loa ia T, moi seenet a T, kaati tuku fakattau e mafuli, tuku fakattau loa a aku. Teelaa laa, toki ake palelo loa ne kai i toko alofa ia T. Teelaa laa, toko salamo, ia koutou ne fai mai kee nnofo maatou, a ko maatou e aummai loa. [lett547; from a woman in her 20s on Funuaafuti to a male relative in his 40s on Nukulaelae, relating her recent boat journey from Nukulaelae to Funaaafuti]

Now, as for the story of our journey, it was very bad. You probably saw how bad the ocean was. We had three waves crash inside our launch. And our launch was stable thanks to T, had it not been for T, in my opinion, it would probably have capsized, this is just what I think. So my liver is eaten up by my alofa for T. And I am full of remorse, because you advised us to stay, but we left anyway.

Third, older individuals often use letters to morally admonish (polopopoloki) their younger relatives, as is also frequent in semiformalized face-to-face admonishing sessions:

kae nofo fakalleli koe, italo ki te Atua kee manuaia koe (kee) toe feiloai taatou i se aso i tema alofa lai, oti te inu, kae fai fakalleli too 21 i konaa, alofa mai laa kia A ma uke au mea e maau i konaa. [lett550]

And live properly, pray to God so that you may be lucky enough for us to meet again one day, stop drinking, celebrate your 21st birthday properly over there, feel empathy toward A here [the recipient’s brother] in case you get a lot of things over there.

Finally, displaying affect is an important function of Nukulaelae letters. Many letters are about affect and related experiences: hoping, longing, and crying. Letter writers ask for forgiveness for past and current wrongdoings; they express empathy, happiness, and love, with an intensity rarely witnessed in face-to-face contexts:9

A maaua i taimi katoo e maua ei nee maaua au tusi, e peelaa loa me se aa te mea tafasili koo maua nee maaua i temaa faffiu mo temaa loto alofa kiua koe. Teelaa laa, e fiaitau nee maaua au tusi kae ttagi, ona ko te maafisau atu moo koe. [lett650]

The two of us, every time we get a letter from you, it is like the most joyous thing that happens to the two of us, given our happiness and alofa towards you in our hearts. Thus, we read your letters and cry, because we keep thinking about you.

But even when affect is not the primary focus of a letter, it always lurks immediately beneath the surface of the discourse. Affect is conspicuous in discussions of economic transactions and in news updates. For example, when monitoring economic reciprocity, letter writers give prominence to the feeling of alofa “love, empathy, compassion,” seen in Nukulaelae economic theory as the principal regulator of the community’s economic life (Brady 1970). When relating news, much emphasis is placed on the emotional aspects of the narrative: narrations are given, as backbone, the affective reaction of individuals involved and the writer’s emotional evaluations of the narrated events. The overttness of this affect contrasts sharply with the covertness with which affect permeates everyday discourse in most face-to-face contexts, including damaging gossip (Besnier 1989, 1990a). Admonitions to younger people are also affectively charged: readers are told not to drink sour toddy, not to gossip in public, to refrain from fighting, to attend church regularly, and to be generous toward their kin; in short, to comport themselves as kind, generous, and responsible adults, entities whose local definition centralizes affective comportment (Besnier 1990a).

Reading and writing practices surrounding Nukulaelae letters lend further support to an analysis of letters as affect-laden texts. Indeed, in the frenzy of preparations for ship days (about once a month), when relatives and friends leave and arrive, letter writing plays a central role, along with food preparation, which is itself defined as expression of the feeling of alofa for travelers and relatives living off the atoll. Late on the night before the ship day, women and men of all ages can be seen feverishly filling pages of writing, sometimes with tears rolling down their cheeks, concentrating on a handwriting that
gradually becomes looser, disorganized, and lyrical (the affective content of many letters and the lack of attention to form tend to increase as the letter develops). Similarly, letters are carefully and more or less laboriously read, and tears often accompany this decoding process; when pictures are enclosed, this effect is further increased.

Letter writing and reading on Nukulaelae are thus defined as affectively charged events. While all affective categories that occur in the text of letters may also occur in face-to-face contexts, their intensity and frequency in letters are remarkable. Also remarkable is the fact that affect in letters is considerably more overt and explicit than in face-to-face contexts, where affective meaning tends to be alluded to indirectly (cf. Besnier 1990a). Thus, letter writers make little use of punctuation, underlining, and other ways of “superposing” affective meaning in the written texts produced by members of other societies. Rather, they lexicalize and grammaticalize affect.

The question of whether such affect represents “genuinely felt” emotions to which one feels “committed” needs to be contextualized in Nukulaela and ethnopsychological theory. Like members of many other societies in the Pacific (Levy 1984; Lutz 1988; Ochs 1988; Rosaldo 1980; Shore 1982), Nukulaela islanders do not disassociate emotion, affect, and social action. Emotions on Nukulaela are defined behavioral. In the light of this view, the fact that letters are more affectively charged than other communicative contexts is in and of itself analytically significant.

Particularly salient in letters are expressions of the writer’s vulnerability to circumstances and strong emotional experiences, and of the writer’s positive feelings toward the addressees (cf. the frequent references to alofa “love, empathy,” etc.), which in other Nukulaela contexts are only found with comparable intensity in a few, highly marked types of situations, particularly parting interactions. An explicit rapprochement between farewells and letter writing is made in some letters:

Talu mai te aso ne maavave e tataou, i te afasi teena, a maatou mo Selu, Opetaia, Teika, Sene, mo tamaliki katoa, koo ttagi i te masausau atu kiaa koe. I te paleleega o temotou lotu, a ko Opetaia koo fakasamau aka nea ia a tau massami i taimi o tou lotu afasi, a koe see mafai loa o fano ki se koga fakaalatea. . . A Sene i te taimi teena koo tagi, a ko au foki koo tagi, a maatou koo ttagi katoa loa i te maafau atu ki ou uiga ggali mo ou fai aina llei ne vai i loto i te kaiga, peelaag foki ki te fenua. Koo leva kkkii eloa temotou sagasaga, takatokato foki, kaatue fai temotou meaak. Maafagaa laa o mea maasei ko o te olaa nofo tasi i se maafataga sosolo llei, kaee toe maavave i se taimi. [lett556]

On the day that we parted, that evening, all of us, Selu, Opetaia, Teika, Sene, and all the children, we cried while reminiscing you. After our evening prayer, Opetaia started reminiscing about your habit of never darting off anywhere after evening prayer. . . Sene then started crying, and I cried too, and all of us cried thinking of your nice attitude and of the nice things you would do at the heart of the kin group, and also for the island community. We sat or lounged around for a long while, and then finally had dinner. There is nothing more painful than living together in harmony, and then the next thing you know we have to part once again.

Letters are thus framed as emotionally cathartic situations in which certain types of emotions are hypercognized (Levy 1984). Emotionality appears to have been centralized in letters since the inception of literacy on the atoll (Besnier 1989) and today is a central element of the definition of the production and consumption of epistolary texts as a literacy practice. The conceptual link between farewells, which are characterized by a hyperemotional tone, and letters is suggestive as a possible explanation for the salience of affect in letters.

**Written Sermons**

In contrast to letter writing, an essentially secular practice, 10 sermon writing preserves the strong associations that literacy had with matters religious when first introduced. Nukulaela islanders adhere to a congregationalist brand of Protestantism, in the spirit of which the responsibility of conducting some of the religious ceremonies is handed over to certain members of the congregation. While the island pastor conducts a service on Sunday morning, deacons and lay preachers (mostly, but not exclusively, adult males) con-
duct services on one weekday and on Sunday afternoon. As in all reformed denominations, the sermon plays an important role in these services.

Written sermons have a mnemonic function. They are written out ahead of time in the form of continuous texts that are partly read, partly elaborated upon during oral delivery, depending on the proficiency of the deliverer. Mostdeacons are accomplished orators, and could easily deliver their sermons without notes. But written sermons are part of the infrastructure of the religious performance, in other aspects of which literacy plays an important role: the church service is the only occasion in most Nukulaelae islanders' weekly routines on which they read from a book, and carrying one's Bible to church is a must. Often, Nukulaelae islanders will also bring to church books that are not even used there, such as Bibles in English and religious pamphlets, which they may or may not open during the service. Other books with no religious content are also sometimes brought to church, such as, during my 1990 field sojourn, the copies of Munro, Iosefa, and Besnier (1990) that I distributed widely on the atoll.

Sermons are saved in exercise books similar to those used to record traditional lore, also called api.11 Because less-experienced deacons and lay preachers "borrow" sermons from the api of senior relatives and friends, the authorship of these sermons is frequently blurred. This process presupposes a close personal relationship between borrower and lender, as sermons have clear symbolic and economic value as items of knowledge and wisdom (the same attitude governs the dissemination of "traditional" knowledge). Sometimes the lenders are from another island, which is why the texts of sermons sometimes have linguistic features from dialects of Tuvaluan other than the Nukulaelae and Funa-

futu dialects. Modern sermons increasingly betray the influence of sermon manuals in English, which have begun to appear in the Nukulaelae literacy marketplace, and are prized possessions. Borrowing, observing, and copying are the principal means through which sermon-writing skills are transmitted, following traditional patterns of skill acquire-

tion on Nukulaelae. In both method of preservation and instruction, written sermons are well integrated into familiar patterns of Nukulaelae social life.

However, in terms of their textual content, sermonic discourse contrasts markedly from discourse produced in other communicative events. The sermon's primary function is to manipulate abstract notions and terms (e.g., goodness, sin, God), to define them, contrast them with each other, analogize from them and evaluate the relevance of what the Bible says about them for contemporary life:12

Manatu silisili: Te taimi o te fakaolataga.
Pesili: Se aa te taimi o te fakaolataga? [serm406]

Main theme: The time of resurrection.
Question: What is the time of resurrection?

Such manipulations of information often take the form of lists:

I te Feagaiga Muamua, a te muna "alofa" se pati koo leva ne fakaogaa ki vaega e uke i tona uiga:
(i) te alofa ki tautaasoa
(ii) te alofa ki maataua
(iii) te alofa ki tamataene ki tamaafine
(iv) te alofa e faipati e le poto ko Solomona. . . .
I loto i te Feagaiga Fou, a te muna teenei, "alofa," e fakaasi i konei tona kaatoatoa mai i te Feagaiga Muamua kee oko ki te Feagaiga Fou, koo kaatoatoa i e te muna "alofa." [serm405]

In the Old Testament, the word "love" is a word that had been used for a long time for many types of meaning:
(i) love for one's friends
(ii) love for one's parents
(iii) love of a young man for a young woman
(iv) the kind of love that the wise Solomon talks about. . . .

In the New Testament, this word "love" is used with its full meaning, from that used in the Old Testament to that used in the New Testament, its meaning is complete.

Frequently manipulated in sermons are various types of nonnegotiable truths:
Ko ia fua toko tasi tou taugaasoa see lavea, e see toko lua, e see toko tolou, e toko tasi eiloa. Ko ia teelaa e fakappula nee ia ou mata faka-te-fakatauanga kee lavea e nee koe a ia mo tena kaup tokou uke, kolaa e tausi kiaa koe mo au mo taatou. Fpula tonu ou mata kee lavea e nee koe. [seim424]

It is him alone who is your invisible friend, there aren’t two of them, there aren’t three of them, only one. It is him that makes the eyes of your belief see him and his numerous cohort, those who watch over you and me and us all. Open your eyes so that you can see.

Like the api in which “traditional” knowledge is preserved, the sermons preserved in api thematize information, truth, and knowledge. But, at the same time, the authoritative thematization of truth and knowledge in sermons contrasts with most other interactional contexts on the atoll, where Nukuleaelae islanders have a truly hermeneutic approach to “truth,” one that is infinitely negotiable and intersubjectively constructed (Besnier 1990b). The epistemological stance taken in Nukuleaelae sermons is reminiscent of that of Christian Ilongot oratory, where “understanding, as it derives from the unambiguous authority of God or Bible . . . is directly accessible” (Rosaldo 1973:221).

While sermons are concerned with informational content, they also have a clear affective component, which differs from that of letters. As moral texts, sermons are frequently exhortative and accusatory. Sermon writers blame, threaten, and command:

Kae pei aka ki mea taaua o te maaina, taki fakallei eiloa taatou nee taatou, e peelaal eiloa mo taatou e nnofo i te av. Saa fajfija vaalera, saa koonaar, saa amio maasei, io me kaimanako ki te fua maumea, saa taua io me kainsanosano. Kae fakake ia koutou a te Aliki ko Iesu Keliso, me ko te fakagataaga foki teenaa o manakoga faka-te-foitino. [seim406]

But wear the clothes of enlightenment, let us guide ourselves as if we lived in daylight. Don’t get excited for no real reason, don’t drink. Don’t do bad things, or be greedy for wealth, don’t fight or harbor ill feelings. But raise in yourselves the Lord Jesus Christ, because he is the one that also puts an end to earthly desires.

In oral performance, sermons are delivered in a very loud voice, particularly as the performance gets under way, with fingers pointing at the audience and much rhetorical emotionality. This performance style, reminiscent of the fire-and-brimstone style of certain fundamentalist Christian denominations in the West, contrasts sharply with the rhetoric used in other contexts, where circumspection, indirection (particularly in communication among adult men), and nonconfrontation dominate (Besnier 1988). The affective content and style of sermons thus contrast sharply with that of letters, with their positive and vulnerable affective stance.

The authors of sermons are in a position of absolute authority over their audience. As interpreters of the Scriptures, they engage in much quoting, thereby aligning themselves with biblical authority:

Kae fai mai a te foatupu e tolou o te tasi nee faiatu nee taatou, “Ne tei atu Ieessuu, ‘E see agasala a te tagata teenei, io me ko ona maatua, ka koo tupu te mea nei kee fakaasi ei te mmana o te Atua, i te faiga kee llei ona mata.’ ” Festili: Koori teenei e faipati? Kae ne a a foki ana pati? Ko te Aliki fakaala teenei e faipati. E fakaasi nee Ieessuu i te tino kini e llei fua i te mmana o te Atua. [seim415]

And the third verse of the book we have read says, “Jesus answered, ‘This man has not sinned, nor have his parents; what has happened to him was meant to show God’s power, in making him see again.’ ” Question: Who is this that’s speaking? And what did he say again? It is the Lord our savior speaking here. Jesus shows that the blind man is cured through God’s power.

Armed with this authority, they moralize and pontificate to the rest of the community. As an oral event, the sermon involves a particularization of text production, in a society that otherwise sees social action, including linguistic action, as the result of consensus more frequently than the responsibility of single individuals (cf. Brenneis 1987 for a comparable analysis of Fiji Indian communicative ideology). Individuals who, in other arenas of social life, have an unassuming and meek comportment, can take on a vociferous and overwhelming demeanour at the pulpit. The audience, in contrast, sits and listens, often in catatonic awe at the power of the text and of the delivery. The strong authoritative presence associated with the role of sermon writer and deliverer are clearly reminiscent
of the extreme personal, marginally divine authority of the Samoan pastor in early days of literacy (Brady 1975; Munro 1978, 1982), which still colors the relationship between the contemporary pastor and his congregation (cf. Goldsmith 1989a).

As both oral and written events, sermons play a complex cultural role. On the one hand, they are clearly naturalized in the symbolic economy of the community. On the other hand, they differ from other interactional contexts in several respects: thematically; in terms of the relationship between participants in the social situation with which they are associated; and, most importantly for this discussion, in terms of which aspects of the Nukulaelae notion of person are articulated in their writing and performance. Sermons inherit the marked characteristics of the social situations in which they are embedded. The complexity of the role of the sermon is clearly constitutive of the complex status of religious services (and more generally Christianity) on Nukulaelae. On the one hand, churchgoing is an integral part of the weekly round of activities, and daily life is organized, in significant ways, around the church and associated institutions. As elsewhere in Western Polynesia, Christianity, its ethics, and its rituals are strongly naturalized in Nukulaelae society and culture. On the other hand, religious activities and contexts on the atoll bear a strong imprint of their status as recent imports: the church building on Nukulaelae is a tall and massive coral-stone building that towers in the center of the village, dwarfing the thatched or corrugated-iron homes huddling around it. The church service is also the only Nukulaelae context in which everyone has to wear a long muumuu or a shirt, and sometimes a tie and Western-style trousers; where the two gender groups sit in a segregated fashion; where respect is displayed by standing up rather than sitting down; and where one sits on benches rather than mats. As noted earlier, it is also the one Nukulaelae context of social life where everyone carries a book.

Thus the marked nature of church services and of religious life in general colors and is colored by the cultural texture of literacy practices associated with it. The participant structure of religious events differs from that of other events, in terms of the physical organization of the communicative event, but also in terms of who is entitled to talk or write and how knowledge and authority are distributed among participants. Many of these characteristics are centrally articulated in the sermon as both a spoken and a written event. For example, it is in the sermon that the authority asymmetry between the speaker-writer and the audience is defined and strengthened. Thus the sermon both inherits the predefined cultural dynamics of Nukulaelae religious life and reinforces them.

**Literacy and the Nukulaelae Construction of Personhood**

In many respects, literacy on Nukulaelae differs radically from the essayist literacy practices encountered in Western middle-class-dominated institutions that proponents of the autonomous approach to literacy tacitly take as the model for “prototypical,” “full-blown” literacy (Street and Besnier 1992). Clearly, a society like Nukulaelae, where literacy is well integrated into the communicative repertoire of the members of the group, can be thoroughly literate without having absorbed essayist traditions.

Further, the two Nukulaelae settings in which literacy is centralized have differing communicative functions and sociocultural associations, as illustrated above. One of the more interesting of these characteristics is the relationship between each literacy practice and different aspects of the Nukulaelae notion of person, viewed here as the basis upon which individuals ground social and interactional dynamics. As elsewhere in Polynesia (Gerber 1985; Ito 1985; Kirkpatrick 1983, 1985; Levy 1973; Shore 1982) and in contrast to “Western societies” (as described, from various angles, by such scholars as Bellah et al. 1985; D’Andrade 1987; Dumont 1966; Geertz 1983; Howard 1983; Mauss 1938; Shweder and Bourne 1984), the person on Nukulaelae is perceived as a complex system of more or less autonomous *uiga* “meanings” that are selectively foregrounded in different social contexts, and that sometimes generate conflicting needs and agendas (multifaceted and context-bound notions of person are not confined to Polynesia; cf. Trawick 1988 on
Tamil Nadu). Each aspect of the person, which lacks the consistency and homogeneity characteristic of many Western notions of personhood, is related in complex ways to particular emotional experiences, interactional dynamics, and social roles. One’s *uiga* are frequently associated with one’s ascendance; thus, Nukulaelaeans will strive to find an explanation for traits like stinginess and irritability by invoking a person’s genealogical links (both blood links and adoptive links) to communities both within or outside Tuvalu that have the reputation for stinginess (e.g., Nanumaga Island, where the scarcity of economic resources is linked to a definition of *alofa* that differs from that of other island communities within Tuvalu) or anger (e.g., Micronesian Kiribati, where anger and aggression are reputedly handled much more overtly than on Nukulaelae). Affective displays of various types in interactional contexts are thus linked to the different *uiga* that the individual inherits from kinship ties. In Nukulaelae ethnopsychology, the notion of self as locus of psychological experience and that of person as social performer (G. Harris 1989; La Fontaine 1985) are interrelated in a particularly complex fashion, casting doubt on the analytic relevance of a self/person dichotomy (cf. Kirkpatrick and White 1985): on Nukulaelae, the self may indeed be as inherently “sociocentric” (Shweder and Bourne 1984) and interactively defined as the person.

As mentioned earlier, literacy itself is viewed as an important element in the definition of the person in Nukulaelae society; being able to read and write is presupposed in the characterization of a socially competent person. At this general level, literacy is already constitutively related to personhood. Furthermore, Nukulaelae’s two literacies foreground different aspects of the multifaceted person that are in turn associated with distinct power relationships between participants, different social roles, differing affective categories, and distinct interactional styles. Personal letters highlight affectivity, particularly those affective categories that locate the individual in relation to a complex socioeconomic system, such as the emotions of *alofa* that are constitutive of generosity (which motivates giving), those of sociability (which underlies the expression of phatic affect), and concern for younger kindred (which, in turn, motivates admonishments). The person, as represented in letters, is a vulnerable entity at the mercy of emotional experiences and the circumstances of life. In contrast, sermons bring out in the person authoritarianism and assertiveness and highlight asymmetries in power, knowledge, and morality between the writer-performer and the audience. As they occupy the seat left vacant by the Samoan pastor-ruler, sermon writers are in a position from which they can harangue, impose their points of view, and accuse in ways that would be perceived as highly dysfunctional in other contexts. Thus, each of the two literacy practices calls upon different aspects of the definition of the person and is located in different interactional, social, and ideological linkages.

Furthermore, Nukulaelae literacy both resembles and differs from Nukulaelae orality. For example, letters are affectively much more concentrated than most face-to-face contexts; at the same time they derive their affectively laden characteristics from the role they play in the socioeconomic life of the group, from the topics thematized in their texts, and from their connection with particular emotional dynamics in Nukulaelae social life. The privileging of high affect in letters is not intrinsic to the written medium, but the result of the sociocultural meaning of letters. Similarly, writing and delivering sermons brings out aspects of Nukulaelae personhood that contrast sharply with those aspects of it highlighted in other contexts. Yet, again, these characteristics can be explained in terms of the historical and contemporary dynamics underlying the religious contexts in which these sermons are produced and read. Thus, while the superstructure of Nukulaelae written genres resembles that of other societies (e.g., in the distinction between sermons and letters), their infrastructure is thoroughly autochthonized and naturalized by having acquired characteristics that “make sense” from a local perspective.

Nukulaelae’s literacy practices are also bound to the cultural logic of gender. Letters and sermons are most obviously gendered in terms of the participant structure of the social events in which they are embedded: sermons are for the most part (but not exclu-
sively) produced and read by men for a mixed-gender audience, while both men and women read and write letters. In a more subtle way, gender permeates letters and sermons through the affective dimensions of their texts. The forceful moral authority, power-yielding, knowledge-laden aspects of the person that are activated in sermons are all associated with masculinity in Nukulaelae gender ideology. In contrast, the vulnerability and affectivity that letter writers thematize are indexical of female uiga “meanings” of the person, whatever the gender of the letter writer may be. These traits are not exclusively associated with female and male persons respectively, in that both women and men can display them; rather, they are traits that, when manifested consistently across social contexts, define gender categories on Nukulaelae, as they do in other parts of Polynesia (cf. Howard and Kirkpatrick 1989:78–84). The gendering of literacy practices is thus mediated by their affective characteristics: features of written texts index and highlight a particular affective demeanor, which in turn stands in an indexical relationship with gender categories. The relationship between gender and literacy on Nukulaelae illustrates the indirect indexicality characteristic of the relationship between language and gender in general (Ochs 1990, 1991): language is first indexically related to affectivity, which in turn is indexical of gender. Both relationships are indexical because they depend crucially on context for their meaning (Besnier 1990c).

It follows that Nukulaelae literacy cannot be adequately characterized without reference to the different characteristics of various literacy practices in Nukulaelae’s communicative economy, and to the sociocultural linkages associated with these practices. Nukulaelae literacy is not a homogeneous phenomenon, to be contrasted with an equally homogenized orality; rather, it should be viewed as intrinsically multifaceted. Its different manifestations involve the activation of different voices, in a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1971), in the community’s heteroglossic economy of communication. Nukulaelae’s various literacies share properties with different contexts of oral communication: personal letters with paring contexts, sermons with oral religious discourse. However, we cannot explain the different characteristics of letters and sermons by ordering them along an oral-literacy continuum. Neither sermons nor letters are intrinsically more “literate-like” or “oral-like,” because they both share properties with different sets of oral contexts (Besnier 1988). Nukulaelae literacy is best understood in terms of the interface between literacy practices and other sociocultural dynamics, such as personhood, authority, and gender, and in terms of its relationships to other communicative practices of the group.

**Incipient Literacy**

Contemporary patterns of literacy on Nukulaelae are particularly interesting because of their historical context. Literacy on the atoll is a little more than a hundred years old, and it has developed during that time in such a way that almost every adult member of the community is literate—in keeping with the egalitarian ethos that Nukulaelaeans emphasize in explaining their institutions and the social processes they engage. At the same time, literacy is a recent enough innovation for the situation to be considered relatively incipient. These two characteristics make of Nukulaelae an ideal case study upon which hypotheses can be based regarding the development of literacy in newly literate societies, hypotheses that invite comparison with other situations of incipient literacy.

Many of the contexts in which literacy-producing practices take place in contemporary Nukulaelae society did not exist before the introduction of literacy: the physical isolation of the atoll rendered long-distance communication with the rest of the world extremely infrequent prior to missionization, and the aboriginal religion, about which very little is known (Brady 1970; Goldsmith 1989a; Munro 1982), probably wasn’t characterized by religious discourse genres comparable to contemporary Christian sermons. (It is important to note that these contexts were not created by literacy, but rather that literacy was shaped to answer the needs created by these new contexts.) Yet today both practices are well integrated in the communicative repertoire of Nukulaelae society. This suggests that,
in the course of the last hundred years, Nukulaelae islanders have actively integrated literacy into the full range of their communicative activities. They have also redefined literacy from the narrow range of consumption-oriented activity that Samoan pastors introduced (i.e., reading the Christian scriptures) to a much broader range of activities involving both production and consumption. Further, they have given to different literacy activities characteristics patterned on interpersonal dynamics at play in oral contexts, thus developing local definitions of literacy.

In the Nukulaelae case, in other words, literacy was not merely “imposed” from the outside as a foreign technology and sociocultural construct. It was instead constructed and adapted to the Nukulaelae communicative repertoire.

Late-19th-century Nukulaelae islanders were not the powerless recipients of a literacy ideology imposed from without the group; they were not passive witnesses to the introduction of literate technologies, as incipiently literate societies are often portrayed to be in areal studies (Jackson 1975; Koskinen 1965; Mühlhäusler 1990; Parsonson 1967; Topping 1983) and theoretical works (Goody 1977; Goody and Watt 1963; Ong 1982). Rather, they took an active role in “empowering” literacy (Kulick and Stroud 1990) by providing it with a culturally specific meaning and shaping it to fit their needs—a process that may have begun very early in their postcontact history. For example, as I have already suggested, letter writing may have bloomed at the end of the 19th century to cope with slavers and changing economic conditions. Similar results are suggested by the few case studies available on comparable situations in Papua New Guinea (Kulick and Stroud 1990; Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith 1984) and Central Australia (Ferguson 1987).

Conclusions

The two contexts in which literacy is produced today on Nukulaelae have little in common with one another: one is secular, the other sacred; one is “private,” the other “public”; they are gendered in different ways; they have distinct historical antecedents; and they involve different facets of the Nukulaelae notion of the person. Two different literacy activities thus have developed in a relatively short time, which suggests that literacy, from its inception, was associated with heterogeneous experiences. Often, discussions of the spread of literacy across cultural boundaries tacitly view literacy as a unitary technology that, once introduced as a unified phenomenon, eventually gives rise, after many centuries, to different practices. The Nukulaelae case allows us to question this view. Rather than gradually diversifying its uses over time, members of incipiently literate groups may immediately perceive the potential heterogeneity of literacy, and use it to answer varied social and communicative needs. In the case of Nukulaelae, this process seems to have been naturally shaped by the diverse contours of a heteroglossic notion of person.

Letter writing, an activity in which all members of the society partake, serves a variety of social and communicative functions, which stand out vividly in the text of letters. But whatever their function, letters are privileged as loci of certain affect displays, particularly displays of emotional vulnerability and positive affect. Religious sermons, in contrast, are associated with a highly authoritative social role and a culturally marked social context. While they also foreground certain affective experiences, the texts of sermons bear witness to the moral authority that historical processes have bestowed on the sermon writer and performer. Literacy on Nukulaelae thus plays different social roles; in particular, letters and sermons are associated with different cultural linkages, particularly with different manifestations of a fundamentally heteroglossic view of the person. Literacy practices derive their meaning from these linkages and associations, in which affect figures prominently as a mediating resource. Nukulaelae literacy has acquired meanings consistent with broader psychological, social, and cultural processes.

Furthermore, I suggest that members of incipiently literate societies do not necessarily perceive literacy as a monolithic entity that gradually diversifies over time. People in such
situations are actively engaged in defining the roles that literacy will play in their culture, and may quickly view it as a multifaceted resource. The heteroglossia already present in Nukulaelae society may have been particularly propitious in this respect in the early development of literacy on the atoll.

Throughout this article, I have adhered to an ideological approach to literacy, which argues that literacy must be studied as an inherently multifaceted phenomenon, embedded in a social, cultural, and political context. The analytic difficulties that one would encounter were one to apply the autonomous model of literacy to the Nukulaelae data lend support to the validity of the approach assumed in this study. An autonomous approach would claim that Nukulaelae is a situation of “restricted” literacy (Goody 1977), or an oral culture “shrouded in writing” (Ong 1971:261). Here “restricted” literacy would have to be understood as “situationally restricted,” in that every Nukulaelae islander has access to literacy, in contrast to situations of restricted literacy commonly focused on by Goody and others in which only members of a political, religious, or intellectual elite have access to literacy. But, clearly, labels like “restricted literacy” and “oral culture” are so ill-defined as to be essentially meaningless as units of analysis or description (Street and Besnier 1992).

In an attempt to clear a path toward explanatory generalizations within the ideological framework, I have identified ways in which literacy and context can be intertwined. Nukulaelae literacy is best understood as part of an economy of affect (i.e., the linkage between affectivity, on the one hand, and such social processes as situation, power, prestige, knowledge, and gender) in verbal communication, which mediates the relationship between the written word and other sociocultural processes. Literacy is constructed on Nukulaelae around various aspects of the local definition of the person, in which affect plays a central role. Since it both reflects and helps define its contexts of use, Nukulaelae literacy must be seen as constitutive of the psychological, social, and communicative processes at play in the context in which it is produced and consumed. In particular, a complex linkage ties literacy to broader social processes such as gender, personhood, and the political economy of power, authority, and knowledge (Bourdieu 1982). With this analysis of Nukulaelae literacy, a more precise agenda can be developed for the exploration of the relationship between literacy and its context: it suggests a constitutive linkage between the two, and identifies affect, personhood, and gender as components of context to be examined in the cross-cultural study of literacy. The generalizations that the ideological model of literacy seeks are thus systemic: the model explores how literacy interacts with social categories and communicative processes, and how changes from preliteracy to literacy go hand in hand with changing social dynamics. These generalizations are thus qualitatively different from the universalistic statements that proponents of the autonomous model have traditionally sought.

Notes

Acknowledgments. Fieldwork on Nukulaelae was conducted in 1980–82, 1985, and 1990. I gratefully acknowledge the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Harry F. Guggenheim Foundation, and the Fondation de la Vocation for their support, and the government of Tuvalu and Nukulaelae’s Council of Elders for permission to conduct field research. This paper was presented at the University of Sussex, the University of Hawaii, the University of Sydney, and Bond University. Ivan Brady, Janet Keller, Miki Makihara, Sue Philips, Brian Street, and anonymous referees generously provided detailed criticisms on earlier versions, and additional comments were offered by Rick Feinberg, Monty Lindstrom, Doug Munro, Richard Ogust, and Alan Rumsey. The usual disclaimers apply.

1 Compared to island groups of the Eastern Pacific that were missionized and colonized early in the 19th century, Nukulaelae and the rest of Tuvalu had for a long time only little contact with the Western world, in part because they offered few resources that 19th-century Westerners deemed exploitable (Brady 1975; Laracy 1983; Munro 1982). The Samoan teachers were thus entering a territory of which they virtually could gain full control as a colonial body.
Until recently, the Samoan translation of the Christian scriptures was in use. In 1978, a Tuvalu translation of the New Testament and, in 1987, of the complete work, became available, and soon replaced the Samoan versions. Correspondingly, passive bilingualism in Samoan and Tuvalu has given way to Tuvaluan monolingualism.

In recent years, primary schooling and government-related institutions such as banking have played an increasingly important role in the intellectual, economic, and political superstructure of the atoll. But the consumption-oriented literacy practices associated with these institutions have relatively little impact in the everyday life of most people. While they should clearly be taken into account in a lengthier ethnography of Nukulaelae literacy practices, they can justifiably be left aside in this essay. Lack of space also precludes a discussion of the acquisition of literacy by children (but see Duranti and Ochs 1986 for a description of literacy acquisition in a Samoan village, which bears many similarities to patterns found on Nukulaelae).

There are slight structural differences between the Funafuti (de facto national) and Nukulaelae dialects, which are not reflected in writing.

Of the latter, little information is available because they are essentially secret texts, reminiscent of Arabic literacy practices among the Mende (Bledsoe and Robey 1986).

The emotion verb alofa is translated here as “empathy” for convenience. In fact, it denotes a very complex emotional category (see Gerber 1985 and Levy 1973 for discussions from other Polynesian settings).

The corpus of texts from which the examples quoted here are taken is described in Besnier (1988). The orthography and punctuation of quoted passages have been standardized for the sake of legibility. Double graphemes indicate gemination and g stands for a velar nasal consonant.

As Goody (1977:74–111) notes, lists appeared very early in the history of writing in various parts of the world. In Nukulaelae society, lists are found in a wide variety of spoken and written contexts, including both literacy practices focused on here. A comparison of list-making as a genre across Nukulaelae communicative events is beyond the scope of this article.

Interestingly, affect displays in letters seem to be exempt from the very strong avoidance constraints placed on first and second cousins of the opposite gender, which effectively rules out any face-to-face interaction between them.

The texts of letters do contain many references to religious themes (Besnier 1989), but so does a lot of discourse in everyday contexts.

When a distinction must be made, the former are called api lauga “api [for] sermons” and the latter api logo “api [of] traditional knowledge.”

There is no evidence of any poetic structure in the text of sermons, nor in that of letters for that matter. Nukulaelae is in fact devoid of a poetic tradition of any significance.

The contrast between Pacific and “Western” views of the person should not be taken to mean that Westerners have an entirely context-free, holistic concept of the person. As ethnmethodologists and symbolic interactionists (particularly Goffman 1959, 1971) have shown, Western views of the person are frequently constructed in transactional terms, as in the Pacific. The difference is that context-dependent and holistic aspects of the definition of the person are more centralized than its transactional aspects in Western folk models. It should also be noted that many anthropological characterizations of the Western notion of person fall into the trap of overgeneralization, by ignoring such factors as gender, class, and ethnicity for example (cf. Sennett and Cobb 1972), and by their lack of a historical perspective on the question (cf. Bock 1984; Sennett 1976).

I use the word “innovation” rather than “import” to reflect the fact that literacy probably underwent a redefinition after being introduced to the atoll, as it probably does in most cases. Unfortunately, there is no record of what models Nukulaelae’s emerging practices were calqued on.

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