

# Friend of Samoa, Tokelau, welcomes new Ulu, signals new direction

Story and photos by Jaap Jasperse

Faipule Siopili Perez has been inaugurated as the new Ulu o Tokelau.

The ceremony took place on Tuesday. The new titular Head of State in the small Pacific atoll nation is Faipule, the government representative of Nukunonu.

This is the middle one of three atolls that make up Tokelau. The outgoing Ulu, Faipule Kuresa Nasau (of the northernmost atoll, Atafu) formally handed over the tokotoko, the staff of authority, today. This happened during a celebration that included dignitaries and inhabitants of all three nuku (villages), including also the southernmost Fakaofu.

In his farewell speech, Faipule Nasau said the nation could not move forward without demonstrating two important pillars.

"The first is our political commitment to urgently address the quality of life; the second pillar is community ownership," he said.

"The General Fono (Parliament) had important and strategic issues to address, ranging from Budget Mid-Term Review, National Strategic Plan, Transport Solution, Trust Fund Distribution Policy, Infrastructure Development Project. These and other development issues should point to the quality of life for all our people."

It was the Ulu's job to preside over the Executive Council of Tokelau, which reports to the General Fono (Parliament).

To the incoming Ulu o Tokelau, Faipule Nasau urged to continue the journey that has been set through the hard work and dedication from the previous leaders of Tokelau before him - some of whom are no longer alive today. As God is our foundation, he encouraged his successor to take Tokelau to that fishing ground where our people will stand proud.

Upon acceptance of his authority as the new Ulu, Faipule Perez stated clearly: "Tomorrow the wind will change direction".

He thanked the outgoing Ulu Faipule Kuresa for his good leadership in 2014 and expressed the hope of having the privilege of his good guidance in manoeuvring Tokelau's canoe forward.

He then embraced the analogy from the traditional expression of "Taeo ka Fakatiu te Matagi" to implicate institutional reforms; these have become the focus of recent discourses within the three nuku.

Traditionally, before a seasonal change in wind directions, it is time to start preparations for reinforcing family homes.

Also in need of clearing are trees that could become hazards around communal dwellings; and collecting and storing food for what could become weeks of bad weather. The message was simply be strategically well prepared for the winds of change that Tokelau as a nation is



Outgoing Ulu Faipule Kuresa Nasau congratulates Faipule Siopili Perez on becoming the new Ulu o Tokelau, standing under the Tokelau flag.



The Nukunonu mayor, Pulenuku Panapa Sakaria, outfitted in gifts from the Tuvalu community.



Outgoing Ulu Faipule Nasau hands over the staff of authority, the tokotoko, to Faipule Perez to become the new Ulu o Tokelau.



Local schoolchildren treated the crowd to a rousing display of traditional action song and dance.



Evening celebration: members of the Atafu delegation.



Evening celebration: members of the Fakaofu delegation.

about to set sail into.

"We need to get out of our comfort zone and change our attitudes towards our normal service delivery for the betterment of our people," the Ulu said.

The wind image refers to the meaning of the name of Tokelau (literally translated as: North Wind), perhaps also suggesting that a closer cooperation with New Zealand is required.

By the same token, Ulu Perez wants fewer of the Tokelau public service to reside in Apia, and more officials based in Tokelau instead. Accessibility is problematic for Tokelau: It takes at least 24 hours to get there from Apia by boat; there is no air service.

"We have learned that "more" is not

necessarily "better," the Ulu said. "Given our smallness, Tokelau has huge recognized limits; we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems.

We cannot afford to do everything, nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future. So, together, in a spirit of individual sacrifice for the common good, we must simply do our best."

Tokelau's self-governance is subject to support from the Administrator of Tokelau in New Zealand, currently Jonathan Kings in Wellington. Mr Kings was unable to attend this function and Mr Roger Cornforth from the NZ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade spoke on his behalf. He thanked Faipule Nasau for the

contribution he has made to the New Zealand / Tokelau relationship.

"This relationship is in good heart," Mr Cornforth said: "nowhere is this more evident than in the joint commitment to improve the quality of life for the New Zealand citizens of Tokelau."

He also expressed MFAT's desire to work with Faipule Perez, particularly in the area of Quality of Life.

The new Ulu Faipule Perez was sworn in by Father Aro of the Catholic Church on Nukunonu, supported by Deacon Pio Tula. This happened before a large crowd of villagers from all three islands. The school children of Nukunonu made an energetic and varied

display of song and dance which was received by a ravenous crowd. Each village made a cultural presentation of song and dance as well as gifted hand-made hats, fans and mats that Tokelau traditional handicraft is renowned for. Long strands of cloth were wound symbolically around the Ulu and his wife, Taase Perez, to tie them together. Similar gifts were presented to the mayor of Nukunonu, Pulenuku Panapa Sakaria.

As its nearest neighbour country, Tuvalu has many family connections with Tokelau. Distinctly different mats and performances were gifted by the Tuvaluan contingent, who were joined by the dancing new Ulu couple - as indeed they joined in with performances by all

Tokelau villages. Further presentations were made by members of the large Perez family, schoolchildren and others. In good Polynesian tradition, the function was completed by a large luncheon. It featured pigs prepared in a ground-oven overnight, and many local delicacies made of locally grown breadfruit, taro, coconut, and locally caught fish.

The evening celebrations comprised a 4-hour display of song and dance by members of the different nuku. In their brightly coloured uniforms supplemented by leaf skirts and leaves, they were outdoing each other in six rounds of arousing traditional song and dance displays. Much of this was recorded by many a modern smartphone, i-pad and

video camera. That nicely illustrated keeping traditions alive yet keeping up with the times: Tokelau's mission for the future.

While ultimately under the control of Wellington, Tokelau is a self-governing territory of New Zealand. Every three years, General Fono members are elected from each of the three nuku: Atafu, Nukunonu, and Fakaofu. Te Ulu o Tokelau is the titular Head of State, a position held in rotation of villages for the duration of one year. The official number of residents in Tokelau according to the 2011 census, is 1,411. About 7,000 Tokelauans live in New Zealand, smaller numbers also reside in Australia, Samoa and the USA, in American Samoa and Hawaii in particular.