

Consolidated Notes From Meeting/Interview With Emily Sikuli

No recording was made of Tom King's interview of Emily Sikuli on July 15, 1999. The transcript reproduced here was compiled from the extensive notes taken by the researchers. Translations to and from the Tuvaluan by Mr. Tofiga have been omitted.

July 15, 1999

Location: Residence of Foua Tofiga

Tom King, Kristin Tague and Barbara Norris met with Mrs. Emily Sikuli, daughter of Temou Samuela (the bone box builder), at 11:00 a.m. for approximately one and a half hours. The purpose of our meeting was to interview Emily regarding time she spent on Nikumaroro, her experiences there, recollections of her father and Gallagher and the discovery/recovery of the bones suspected by Mr. Gallagher of being those of American aviator, Amelia Earhart.

Emily began our meeting by agreeing that Niku was indeed a beautiful place. She gave us an opportunity to view photos of her mother and father and later photograph and photocopy them. A pleasant, spry woman, approximately 72 years old, Emily answered questions posed to her by Dr. King and interpreted by Foua Tofiga.

TK: Your father is kind of a famous man to us, because we're trying to find that box he built.

ES: [smiles, gets photocopies out of a folder] Here is his picture, and a picture of my mother. [we examine, comment, Barb takes a picture]

TK: We are all interested about the bones in the box. Can you tell us something about the circumstances of that day?

ES: The bones were found in the sea on Nikumaroro. There was a boat that was wrecked, but that boat belonged to New Zealand and that part of the island was named for New Zealand. Where the boat was on the reef. Not too far from there, is where the plane came down. [shown map at this point, she indicates area north of Norwich City on reef]

[Up to this point the interviewers had not said a word about an airplane, just the box, the bones, and her father. However, Foua Tofiga had talked with Emily, arranging for the interview, and later recalled that he had mentioned that we were interested in bones and an airplane.]

TK: Where were the parts of the airplane?

ES: Not far from where the ship was. Not toward the village but away from it. The struts

were there. [holds up hands in circle, apparently indicating that the struts were round in cross-section, about 20 cm. in diameter] It was around that area where the bones were found. Could be bones from the ship or the airplane. During the westerlies, heavy swells took the rest of the bones away. There were not many that we found. Maybe 10 different people whose bones were found along that area. There were some with leather bottles and a pipe. I used to accompany my father to fish. Some people would not go to that area to fish because they were frightened. You would come up on the reef, then the beach comes up where the island shrubs start to grow. [with gestures and words, she and Foua indicated the storm surge line and first Scaevola line in from the beach] That is where the bones were found.

TK: What kind of things did your father make?

ES: My father made rings and combs, and things with inlaid wood. He made rings out of golden coins. He built things of wood. The box he made for the bones was not as big as a usual coffin size. I don't know what timber was used. [To demonstrate the box size, Tom used his hands to get an approximate measurement of 12—15 inches deep and 24 inches in length.] I didn't see the actual bones. I don't know how many bones, but it must not have been many or the box would have been bigger. Many planks were used. Boards were nailed, stained and varnished. My father often worked with kanawa wood.

[She walked clear around the island three times with her father, a great fisherman. This came out in the context of discussing how important her father was in the community, both as carpenter and a fisherman, and how close she was to him. She said she was raised like a man, because she was the oldest in her sibling set.

TK: Did you see the plane fall?

ES: No, it was already there when I came. I came in 1938-1939, when I was 11 years

Appendix: Interviews

old. I left in December 1941. The steel of the plane was there sometime before we got there. [asked specifically about aluminum, she says no] Fishermen found the bones. They were frightened and they brought the story of them to the Onotoa man.

TK: Was that Koata?

ES: [she smiles broadly as in recognition] Yes.

TK: What did Koata do?

ES: He sent people to bring the bones. People were frightened. Only people working for the government received the bones. My father had to look at the bones. Mr. Gallagher asked my father to make the box.

TK: What other kinds of things did your father make?

ES: My father had ceased making rings at that time [not done in the Phoenix Islands]. He was working for the government. He constructed houses, maintained the European houses, the hospital and he went fishing. He helped with the ministry. He took the lead in the systematic planting of the coconut trees. He brought the coconut seedlings from my uncle from Manra, in 1939.

TK: When did you get to Nikumaroro?

ES: We had not been on Beru Island a year when we were sent to Nikumaroro. Perhaps 1938-39. In less than 3 years, I left Nikumaroro.

TK: What caused your family to move to Nikumaroro?

ES: Instructions from the government to build houses and plant coconuts. Uncle Kemo went to Manra to build the hospital building and water tank.

TK: How old were you when your father built the box?

ES: 14 years old, not yet 15. I had been around the island three times with my father. I followed him and sometimes we would turn over turtles.

TK: Where were the turtles mostly?

ES: On the weather side. The government used to send people across the lagoon to pick up the turtles.

[In an unrelated offering at this time, Emily commented that Niku was a pleasant place to live because of knowing Mr. Gallagher and Jack "Uncle Kemo" Pedro, who was also a singer and composer. Jack had three sons in the Gilbertese and Marshall Islands, one son now holding a senior position in the government of the Marshall Islands.]

TK: When your father was building the box was it special?

ES: It was special, but there was no real rush to complete the job quickly. I don't know when the bones were removed from the island.

TK: Please clarify about the bones. Were the 10 skeletons/bodies separate from the bones that were put in the box?

ES: The bones of the 10 people were toward the shoreline, but these bones [the bones in the box her father made] were found on the reef near the remaining parts of the plane. People decided these bones were from the people from the plane. When I used to go to the place, the bones of the 10 people were still there. People who found the bones near the plane were frightened to touch them. They told Teng Koata of the bones and he told Gallagher. Koata had them collect the bones for Gallagher. Until I left the island, I hadn't heard anything about what had happened to those bones. The government put restrictions that children were not to frequent that area.

TK: Did people use parts of the airplane?

ES: I don't know for sure. When we got there only the steel frames were left, only the long pieces were there. We were frightened to go close to the plane. Where the shipwreck was—the remainder of the plane was not very far from there. The waves were washing it in low tide. The 10 people had complete skeletons. Looking at those people, they could be tall people. They were very long. People were afraid of all the bones in both places.

TK: With this map of Niku, can you find where you lived?

ES: We lived at the point at the government station. [She then confirmed the location of the carpenter's house, the European house, the cook boy's house, the police and the hospital.]

TK: Any other parts of the island where people went regularly?

ES: Only where they intended to clear and plant coconut trees. The trees had been cleared to the SE end [gestures over map down past Aukauraima].

TK: Do you know of any graves away from the village?

ES: Only those who died while we were there. [TK: it seemed to me she indicated that she didn't know of any graves not in the village.]

TK: Where you there when Mr. Gallagher died?

ES: No, I wasn't. [she has a brief conversation with Mr. Tofiga] NO! I WAS there. When I was picked up [to go to Suva to attend nursing school] he had already died. It was Sunday morning, we were getting ready for church, December 7th, when I left. [Emily traveled to

Suva with Tofiga who remembers that she cried all night long and he felt helpless to comfort her.]

TK: What was it like when Mr. Gallagher died?

ES: The people were very sad. They did a lot to show respect. The people gathered and made funeral arrangements. There was expression of respect because he was a good man. During storms and westerlies, he would go around and check on people's houses. He made sure we had food. My father built his tomb. Fasimata O'Brian was the wireless operator then. He was a ginger-haired man.

[At this point Sarah, Emily's daughter, interjected, "When mum gets homesick she talks about her father. My mother wants my sons to be like my grandfather. He cared about his family, was a good worker, a good provider. When he went fishing he would catch a lot and then share with everyone. My grandmother died when she was 89. My grandfather when he was 72."]

TK: Any other Nikumaroro residents on Fiji?

ES: Nei O'Brian, the wireless operator's wife is

still alive. She lives in Suva.

TK: Any special areas the children were not allowed to go to?

ES: I never felt frightened because I always followed my father. Restrictions were placed by Koata.

TK: Did you ever hear about a place on Nikumaroro called Niurabo, or about Nei Mangani-buka?

ES: [she gets rather stiff] We all were Christians.

TK: Where did kanawa trees grow?

ES: Here [points out location of Kanawa Point]. They were quite large.

TK: Were there other places where they grew?

ES: [shakes her head]

Emily said that when she left the island a canoe was sent through the surf near Kanawa Point where she was picked up and taken out to the ship.

Present with Mrs. Sikuli were Ric Gillespie, Kris Tague, Russ Matthews, Foua Tofiga, and Emily's daughter Sarah. Emily and Mr. Tofiga,

Transcript of Videotaped Interview With Emily Sikuli

Ric Gillespie's interview with Emily Sikuli on July 27, 1999 was videotaped by team member Russ Matthews and has been transcribed below. Ric, of course, had the benefit of having seen the notes of the earlier interview. Translations to and from the Tuvaluan by Mr. Tofiga have been omitted.

July 27, 1999

At Mrs. Sikuli's home near Suva, Fiji

who served as translator, sat on a sofa facing the video camera operated by Russ. Ric sat on the floor beside the camera. Kris and Sarah sat to the sides. The interview lasted for about an hour and a half from 10:30 a.m. to about noon.

Emily appears to understand English fairly well but is hesitant to speak English herself. She frequently did not wait for Mr. Tofiga to translate short, simple questions but always answered in her native Tuvaluan which was then translated by Mr. Tofiga. (Tuvaluan is the language of the people of the island group formerly known as the Ellice Islands, now the independent nation of Tuvalu. Mr. Tofiga and Mrs. Sikuli were both born in the Ellice Islands.)

RG: What year were you born?

ES: On Funafuti at the company station of an

American company run by Mr. Allen. My father was working there, 1923.

RG: What was your father's name?

ES: Temou Samuela [pronounced Tim-Oh-oo Sa-moo-AY-loo]

RG: What were you called?

ES: They called me Emily. That American man called me Emily.

RG: Any brothers or sisters?

ES: Three brothers, I was the only girl.

RG: What did your father do?

ES: He was a carpenter and did some engineering. Also, electrical, taught by Mr. Allen.

RG: How did your family come to Nikumaroro?

Appendix: Interviews

ES: My father was then working for the government. The government posted him there to build houses and also because he knew how to plant coconut trees so they would grow fast and bear quickly, in two years.

RG: Did the whole family come to Nikumaroro?

ES: Only three of us. Our eldest brother was at Tarawa.

RG: Did your father ever work at building canoes?

ES: Yes, he used to build canoes.

RG: Was that part of his job on Nikumaroro?

ES: Not while I was there. He did build small model canoes as presents.

RG: Do you remember what ship brought the family to Niku?

ES: It was the government ship, Kiakia. Not a big boat.

RG: Were there many people who came with you?

ES: A policeman and his family came also.

RG: Do you remember what year you arrived at Niku?

ES: The year we came off the island I had already spent two years there.

RG: When you first came to Nikumaroro, were there any Europeans living there?

ES: No.

RG: Who was in charge of things? Who was the boss?

ES: In those days the leader of the Gilbertese was Teng Koata.

RG: What kind of man was Teng Koata?

ES: Tall man, and big.

RG: A happy man? a strict man? A jolly man?

ES: He doesn't speak often. What he wants done must be done.

RG: Oh. A strong leader.

ES: Yes.

RG: Were the people afraid of him?

ES: They obeyed him because, as people worked, he worked along with them.

RG: When Dr. King and Kris talked to you before, you told them about an airplane wreck on Nikumaroro when you got there. I'd like you to tell me what you know about that. I'd like to hear your story.

ES: When we went there, no plane came during that time. Until we came off, no plane had come. We only heard that there was a plane that crashed near that ship.

RG: Let me repeat this back to be sure I un-

derstand. No plane arrived or crashed while you were at the island. But, people said that before the people came a plane had crashed there near the ship. And when you refer to the ship you mean the ship that was on the reef, that was aground.

ES: It is true.

RG: Did you ever see any part of that plane?

ES: Only the frame, a piece of steel.

[Mr. Tofiga offers clarification, "Uh, it's not a piece. The term she uses 'afiti', it could be this long or this long." Moves his hands close together then far apart. " But it's steel. Only the framework."]

RG: And where was this piece?

ES: Nearby that wrecked ship. It was not far from there. From about here to that house. [She points to a house across the road.]

RG: OK. That's probably 100 meters. Was it on land or in the water?

ES: On the rocky part. It was not far from where the waves break.

RG: Let's look at a map. If you could show us the shipwreck?

ES: Is this the part called Nutiran? [points to northwestern end of island] Maybe this is the place. [points to the small ship symbol on the map] It was not very far from that place.

RG: [explaining map] This part here is the rock. The waves of the ocean break out here. The beach with the sand is here.

ES: That means this is where that plane was. It was not very far from the ocean where the waves break. That's why the parts of the plane got carried away quickly. That frame was also very rusty.

RG: Could you put a mark on the map where the plane was?

ES: [marks the map] It was here.

RG: And on the back of the map could you draw a picture of what you saw?

ES: It was a long steel. [draws a line] There was a round part of it. [adds a small solid circle at the end of the line] I do not know what part of the plane it was. We were forbidden to go there. I was following my father. When I went there my father stopped me.

RG: Did you go out on the rock or did you only see it from where the sand is?

ES: Only from the sandy part.

RG: How big was this piece?

ES: About four arm spans. [holds her arms out]

RG: So it might fit in this room?

ES: Yes, barely. It was a big plane. [the room

- was perhaps twelve feet long]
- RG: How did you know that this was part of an airplane?
- ES: I heard it from those who were there before us that it was part of an airplane.
- RG: So the people on the island said that this was part of an airplane.
- ES: Yes.
- RG: Did the people know anything about the people who were in the airplane?
- ES: I didn't hear a story in connection with that.
- RG: Were there ever any bones found on Nikumaroro?
- ES: Yes.
- RG: What can you tell us about the bones that were found?
- ES: Some Gilbertese went to fish, they saw in the shallows some pools, at the place where the plane crashed, some bones, and they knew these were human bones because of the skull bone. They went and reported to Teng Koata, there were bones. So from that they assumed that these must have been the bones of those who were in the plane when it crashed. These were under the plane, near the plane. This was near the top end of the steel.
- RG: Did you see the bones?
- ES: I didn't see them. We were forbidden, but my father told us.
- RG: Were the bones found while you were on the island or did this happen before?
- ES: These bones were found when we had already arrived on the island. These Gilbertese came and found bones and reported to Teng Koata. Then Teng Koata took them to the European. So it was arranged for a box to be made for the bones and the bones were brought. There were not many bones.
- RG: And your father made the box?
- ES: Yes, it was he who built the box.
- RG: What kind of wood did he use?
- ES: That I do not know because it was made out of timber belonging to the government.
- RG: Do you remember when the European magistrate, Mr. Gallagher—Mr. Kela—
- ES: Yes, it was his time.
- RG: Do you remember when he first came to the island?
- ES: I do not know.
- RG: Was there ever a time when there were Europeans who came to the island to do things?
- ES: No.
- RG: But you do remember that Gallagher—Kela— came to the island.
- ES: We had not been there one year when Kela arrived. These were the war years. That's when the European came. We heard the news about the war.
- RG: When you lived on Nikumaroro did the people have any animals with them?
- ES: No.
- RG: No animals?
- ES: No.
- RG: No dogs?
- ES: No.
- RG: No pigs?
- ES: No.
- RG: No chickens?
- ES: No.
- RG: You know Mrs. O'Brian.
- ES: Yes.
- RG: Have you ever talked to her about Niku and living there?
- ES: Yes. Those years when Fasimata was still alive we would talk about the good things of Nikumaroro. Very difficult times, too.
- RG: Did you ever talk to Mrs. O'Brian about the airplane wreck on Niku?
- ES: No. We did not discuss about the crashed airplane but we all have heard, knew about this. We also all knew about these bones.
- RG: Were any other bones ever found on Niku?
- ES: Only these few bones they found. They do a search around that area but they found no other bones. Only these big bones that they found. I do not know how many. My father knew.
- RG: Do you know of any other people who are now alive who were there and may also know these stories?
- ES: I don't believe so. Otiria is still alive. I don't know of anyone who is still alive and living in Fiji.
- RG: Anywhere else?
- ES: The majority of the people were moved to the Solomon Islands.
- RG: Did you ever know a man named Bauro Tikana?
- ES: He worked for the government?
- RG: Yes.
- ES: I knew him. He was a clerk. They did not have any children.
- RG: Did you know of a man named Kima Petro?

Appendix: Interviews

ES: [big smile] Our uncle. He married my auntie.

RG: Was there a wireless on the island?

ES: Yes, there was. Fasimata O'Brian operated it. Right inside the European's house was the wireless.

RG: Tell me about when you left Niku, when you went away. How did that happen?

ES: That was the year we came away. It was the government that made that decision. Because we sat a test and it was decided that it was not practical to send us to Tarawa but to bring us to Suva.

RG: Was it your whole family or just you?

ES: It was I only.

RG: So there was a test and you were selected because of this test?

ES: Yes. That is why I came.

RG: Mr. Tofiga, I understand that you remember this. You were there at that time. Is that right?

FT: I was aboard the Viti. We travelled from here in the late November or early December of 1941. I never forget the date because we were at Nikumaroro when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

RG: Do you remember hearing about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

ES: Yes.

RG: So you left Nikumaroro at that time, the time the war in the Pacific began. Is that right?

ES: Yes.

RG: Did you ever go back to Niku?

ES: No.

RG: Do you know of a kind of wood called kanawa?

ES: Yes, that is the one my father was seeking after.

RG: Did this kind of wood grow on Nikumaroro?

ES: There were many of the species called buka bai and also the other tree called nonou, the fruit of which is edible. And also kanawa and naisou and towsoon. These are the trees that grow on the beach.

RG: And your father was especially interested in one kind of wood?

ES: He wanted the kanawa because it is useful. He made tables out of it, and chairs.

RG: Did kanawa grow all over Nikumaroro?

ES: No, not many.

RG: Did it grow in one place or were there just some trees...

ES: [shakes head] [show her map] The kanawa my father found was somewhere around this side. Not many. [pointing to Kanawa Point] Not near the sea but right on the land.

RG: Not near the sea side.

ES: No, on higher land.

RG: When your father built the box for the bones, who asked him to do that?

ES: The European.

RG: Did the European speak the local language?

ES: A few words but he understood the Gilbertese.

RG: What did he look like?

ES: The European?

RG: Yes.

ES: He looked like him [pointing at Russ]. About his size or a little taller but he was slim.

RG: Do you remember when the European died?

ES: Yes, he had an operation before. Not very long thereafter he died.

RG: So, you were still on the island at that time.

ES: Yes.

RG: Do you know if the European knew about the airplane wreck?

ES: In that connection I really no not know. Perhaps.

RG: But Koata knew about it?

ES: Yes. The Gilbertese people because they were there before.

RG: Was there ever a time when Koata left the island?

ES: No. Also, when those people went there the airplane had already crashed before. There were no people there.

RG: Do the Gilbertese people believe in ghosts?

ES: Oh yes [laughs] . They're the ones who make black magic.

RG: Were the Gilbertese afraid of ghosts?

ES: Those who do such are the ones who do not believe. They are frightened. Those who believe are not frightened.

RG: Were there any stories about ghosts on Niku?

ES: I haven't heard any stories about that.

RG: So the people, for example, were not frightened by the bones that were found.

ES: Yes, they were frightened when they saw the skull. They went straight to Koata.

- RG: When the European died, were they frightened by that? Did they associate that with any stories about ghosts or bones?
- ES: No. They were not frightened. They were sad.
- RG: Where was he buried?
- ES: Below the flag. It was my father who made the tomb.
- RG: What was the tomb made of?
- ES: Concrete. Directly under the flag.
- RG: Was that done at the time or later?
- ES: Later. Maybe about a month or so after that.
- RG: Before you talked to Dr. King and to Kris, what did you know about what we're doing, our project? Did you know that we were looking for bones or an airplane on Nikumaroro?
- ES: Perhaps he wanted to know the true story of what happened?
- FT: May I repeat the question? [repeats question in Tuvaluan]
- ES: In connection with that I do not know.
- RG: Do you know the name Amelia Earhart?
- ES: What kind of person is she? Where does she come from?
- RG: America.
- ES: Is she alive?
- Russ: You said there was a part of the island that was forbidden. Why was it forbidden?
- ES: It was forbidden because of the bones of the New Zealanders who died on the shipwreck. They thought the government may send in people to look for the bones.
- RG: So there was a place where there were bones from people who died on the ship?
- ES: I really don't know that. There were people who used to go on board the wrecked ship. My father also went there. No ordinary people were allowed to go there.
- RG: When you saw the piece of steel from the plane wreck, you were with your father?
- ES: Yes, I was accompanying my father.
- RG: And what was he doing there?
- ES: Because he usually goes out to search out the various trees. The government only allows him to go in.
- RG: Did you see the plane wreck just one time or many times?
- ES: Two times. When we passed that place I saw it. He wouldn't let me go out to the wreck because of the government ban.
- Russ: What color was the wreckage that you drew on the map?
- ES: It was very rusty.
- RG: What color rust?
- ES: Very red. When it is seen at low tide. Not observable at high tide. At low tide it could be seen. Very rusty, bad, useless.
- RG: Was there other wreckage or debris around it or all by itself?
- ES: Nothing.
- RG: Did the people in the village have any pieces?
- ES: No.
- RG: You saw none of the other parts of the plane. The aluminum, the shiny parts?
- ES: No, all gone. Nothing.
- Kris: Are any of your brothers who lived on Niku still living?
- ES: The younger one.
- Kris: Where does he live?
- ES: Funafuti.
- Kris: When did the rest of the family leave Niku?
- ES: After the war.
- RG: What's his name?
- ES: Taete. He is five years younger.
- Russ: When did you first see a working airplane?
- ES: 1938. The warship Achilles came to Funafuti. Before the ship reached Funafuti the airplane came over.

