

# Octopus fishing by women of Fakaofu Atoll, Tokelau Islands

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*Feke tu ake auta ia pusi ma mango o ka kati ki te pito.*

Squid, stand up because the eel and the shark will bite at your head

*A song formerly sung by Tokelauan women to entice the feke from the hole (Macgregor, 1937).*

*Tuolo mai feke te pilipili kavei valu e tuolo,  
Mai tuolo mai.  
Ko nohonoho i lo kaoa  
Fakalongona ake pule kua, hoa, hoa, hoa.*

Crawl out, little squid, with eight legs,  
Crawl out, crawl out.  
You stay in your hole  
When you hear the sound, hoa, hoa, hoa, of the crab, crawling.

*A song formerly sung by Tokelauan men to entice the feke from the hole (Macgregor, 1937).*

## Geography

Tokelau comprises the three low-lying atolls of Fakaofu, Nukunono and Atafu, which stretch in a northwesterly direction from 9°23'S and 171°14'W, for a distance of 170 km to 8°30'S and 172°30'W. The southernmost atoll, Fakaofu, is 65 km from Nukunono, with a further 105 km to Atafu, the northernmost atoll.

## Women's fishing

Several people on Fakaofu have commented that women's fishing is not as common today as it once was. A household questionnaire conducted in 1998, revealed that women fished on average two hours per week (Passfield, 1998). Gleaning for octopus (*feke*) is one of the few types of fishing activities practised by women. Others include clam and rod fishing in the lagoon area. Octopus fishing is a favoured and skilled activity undertaken particularly by women of Fakaofu, although men and children also do it.

## Octopus fishing

There are several traditional methods of catching *feke* in Tokelau. One, formerly commonly practised by men, was described to me by an elderly man. This method uses an octopus lure (*puletakifeke*) made from cowry shells of genera *Cyparea* and *Ovulum*. The shells are arranged in the shape of a rat. (This stems from the famous Polynesian legend about the rat and the octopus.) The lure is towed from a canoe along the reef in the lagoon. Small pebbles are placed in the shell which rattles to attract the attention of the *feke*.

The method more commonly used today was described to me by Sofima Niusila, an elderly woman who used to actively hunt *feke*. I also participated in a *feke* fishing excursion with Eleni Pereira, Sofima's daughter.

This method is conducted mainly during the day, at low tide on the reef. A *gagie* (*Pemphix acidula*) stick or a metal rod about one metre long is pushed into a likely *kaoa* (coral hole occupied by octopus).

The stick normally works by drawing out the animal, as its tentacles, one by one, wrap around the stick. Once the head appears, the gatherer works quickly, seizing it around the head with her hand. Within seconds, the *feke* is killed by biting between the eyes or turning its head inside out (see Picture on next page).

If the stick or metal rod is unsuccessful in drawing the *feke* from its hole, the body wall of the sea cucumber, locally called *loli* (*Holothuria atra*), is rubbed around the mouth of the *kaoa*. The bitterness of the *loli* draws the animal out.

The hand is never used to move pebbles from the hole, for fear of being bitten by a moray eel. The collected *feke* are strung on a metal wire or *kalava* (the outer skin of the top surface of the leaf stalk of a coconut frond), which is poked between the two holes located on either side of the head.

Sofima stated that the greater catches of *feke* are taken on *fakaiva ote mahina*—the ninth phase of the moon (nine days after new moon)—though they are caught throughout the year.

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## Identifying *feke* holes

The *feke* blocks the entrance to its *kaoa* by using its tentacles to gather a collection of coral pebbles. An experienced hunter can identify potential *feke* holes by the arrangement and recently disturbed appearance of the pebbles blocking the entrance. The arrangement of the pebbles is also seen as an indicator of the direction the *feke* has taken if it has vacated a hole. For example, if the pebbles lie to the left of the hole, the *feke* moved in the right direction and vice versa. When a *feke* is removed from its hole, the hole is often reoccupied by another. Experienced hunters will memorise the location of the hole for subsequent visits to inspect for reoccupation by another *feke*.

If the water is disturbed by turbulence, coconut meat is chewed and spat out onto the water surface. The coconut oil smooths the water surface, enabling the woman to view clearly beneath the shallow waters for potential *kaoa*.

## Uses

*Feko* are caught for subsistence purposes and as bait for catching certain fin fish. Preparation for consumption is done by baking in the *umu* (traditional oven), boiling by mixing with other ingredients for additional flavour (e.g. curry, coconut cream, onions, herbs) or boiling and then sun-drying. Before cooking, the meat is tenderised by beating with the *gagie* wood or a stone.

Another method for tenderising the meat is wrapping it in *pawpaw* (papaya) leaves, and adding it to boiling water.

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## References

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The *feke* is killed by biting between the eyes