

Expedition “Seladon II”. October 2012.

New sources, new facts and a trip to Rotuma, Tuvalu, Samoa and USA.

The purpose of the trip was to try to find descendants of the native people that helped the shipwrecked Norwegians for over a hundred years ago, and to distribute the English edition of the book “The Wreck of the Seladon”.

Part 1. Rotuma

The native people that in 1896 lit a fire on Niulakitas shore and led the Norwegian lifeboat through the barrier reef and surf was from Rotuma. In October 2012 I was transported by a small Twin Otter airplane to the island of Rotuma.

The first night I stayed at the home of Charles Olsen, one of the many Olsens there. The rest of the week I stayed in the “Woman’s House” as the only guest. Marieta served me three meals a day.

Rotuma is part of Fiji but is situated two hours by plane further north of Fiji, and a day’s journey by boat to the south west of Niulakita. The 1900 inhabitants are Polynesians

Rotuma

I brought along 30 examples of the book in English about the shipwreck of the Seladon. The native inhabitants were of course proud that the rescuers were from Rotuma.

The headmaster of the High School that had read the book asked me to give a talk to the students about the shipwreck of the Seladon.

The headmaster listens while I tell the story about the shipwreck.

After the talk he used the story to encourage the students to light a fire of

hope for others, show the way and always be of help to others in the same manner as Tiki and Penne. He gave Rotuman names to Dick and Belly. The students took along the 13 library copies of "The Wreck of the Seladon" that had been stamped prepared, so that they could show and tell their parents and grandparents about the shipwreck of the Seladon.

Every morning Marieta told me stories about people coming to her door asking for the book "that everyone was talking about", or about spouses stealing the book from each other before one was finished reading it. Marieta brought also the book along with her to church to show it to people there.

She let me borrow a bicycle so I could easily get around on the island and talk to older people I met on my rounds. I asked them if they knew about native inhabitants that had been born on Niulakita a hundred years ago or others that had returned to Rotuma from Niulakita.

A common female name on Rotuma is Tuma which is pronounced Toma. Attendant Thomas Berentsen on the Seladon, named his only daughter home in Norway Toma. Some believe that the name was the same as of one of the women that helped them while they were on Niulakita. It is also possible that the name is derived from his own name Thomas, but he could have gotten the idea on Niulakita. Tuma is an abbreviation of Terrotuma which means one that has left Rotuma.

An expression in a section of the old book about Seladon's shipwreck has puzzled me, it says that the bride and groom exchanged "chewed". Marieta told me that on Rotuma there was an old tradition that a chief under certain occasions could have his food chewed by a woman, but the condition was that the woman was a young virgin.

During my stay I was interested in finding out if someone on Rotuma had a grandparent that had been born on Niulakita. If so, that person could be one of Tiki's four children. Tiki had died of blood poisoning shortly after rescuing the Norwegians. His widow with the four children left Niulakita before 1911, as indicated by the island's census.

The history teacher at the High School told me an old story. Two brothers left Rotuma in a canoe and got aboard a ship. They refused and resisted with the use of physical force to return to the canoe. Because of the struggle, the captain let them stay onboard. But it is reasonable to believe that they were put ashore on the next visited island. It is said that the two brothers never returned to Rotuma. We know that Tiki and Penne were brothers.

Part 2. Tuvalu

After returning to Fiji from Rotuma, my next trip went to Tuvalu with another suitcase full of books. But before leaving I searched an archive for the Fiji Times for 1897. There I found an interesting article written two days after the survivors had arrived at Suva with the steamship Clyde on August 2, 1897. I will refer to the new information found in the Fiji Times later in this article.

I headed for the City Hall immediately after my plane had landed on Funafuti, the capital of Tuvalu. There I contacted Apisai Ielemia who is now the Foreign Secretary.

Foreign Secretary Apisai Ielemia

He was the person that in 2008, had requested the story about Seladon's shipwreck in English. I now handed over to him his personal copy and a couple of extra books for the department of education. The next day they purchased all the 40 books available for sale in order to distribute these to the school libraries on the islands. This was broadcasted on the news the day I left the country.

As a friendly gesture I was invited to lunch with Foreign Secretary Apisai Ielemia and his wife. They told me that the country recently had a successful official visit of Prince William and Kate. I could then inform them that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge had received a copy of our book before they traveled to Tuvalu, and that we had received a nice letter of thanks from Buckingham Palace.

Also this time I had good fortune on Tuvalu. In two days, the ship

Manufolau was to visit the Seladon island Niulakita and Nukulaelae.

I did not get to spend so many hours on the island as on my last visit, but I did find out that all the inhabitants were now replaced with new ones, also this time from Niutao. The number of inhabitants was 50, of which 15 were school children. I took part in the loading of several thousand coconuts that were bundled together by tens and dozens of plastic jugs with calevy. Calevy is a drink drawn from the coconut palm.

I spent a little time investigating what kind of trees the shipwrecked sailors had climbed in order to catch the black birds. Abraham Tjelta said in a newly discovered interview that the birds perched in the trees or bushes along the beach after nightfall. Today there are still trees here that are easy to climb. One of the crew members was able to climb all the way to the top of the highest tree on the island to scout for ships. The Fiji Times said that the Norwegians had hoisted “a signal”, perhaps in the form of a flag at the top of the highest tree on the island in an attempt to attract the attention of a steamer, but they passed by too far away. Also today, one coconut palm towers higher than the others on the beach.

Some more new details from the Fiji Times: During the last week in the lifeboat when they ran out of food, they sailed on, more dead than alive. They were reduced to mere skeletons. They used an hour to approach the island from the time they had discovered Niulakita. When they reached the beach they just laid there completely exhausted, unable to get up without help.

It is now clear that it was a canoe they used the day that they caught the attention of the steamer Clyde. They carried an English flag on the canoe. Someone meant earlier that they had repaired the lifeboat. Abraham said that the biggest piece left of the lifeboat was the rudder.

Del 3. Samoa

It gradually became apparent that most likely Tiki's widow and four children traveled with the supply ship from Niulakita to Samoa. Niulakita's owner, Harry Jay Moors, that ran his business from Samoa, had a supply ship that

transported copra from Niulakita and other islands to his warehouse in Apia, the capital of Samoa.

My journey to Samoa went via Fiji. One week on Samoa was ahead of me. How much could I discover here as the island has 200 000 inhabitants? The newspaper Samoa Observer printed a half-page article with the picture of the books author and with the title: Looking for Tiki.

That very night my phone rang at the motel I was staying. It was the descendants of Harry Jay Moors on the line.

The next day I was interviewed by Radio Polynesia and it was also broadcasted to the neighboring country of American Samoa.

On the third day a new interview was broadcasted on TV3.

I visited Mark Moors, the grandson of Harry Jay Moors in his shop.

Mark Moors and his wife

He believed that the archives containing the complete names of employees like Tike and Penne, and the names of the widow and the four children that perhaps immigrated to Samoa, is held in New Zealand. The head of the archive at the university in Apia, Ms. Amela Silipa believes that some archive material is to be found in New Zealand and some in Germany. Samoa was governed by Germany from 1900 to 1914. Ms. Silipa is in the process of digitalizing the archives on Samoa.

H. J. Moors was an influential man in Samoa. In addition to trading copra, he owned the hotel Tivoli that was recently torn down. He was the one that brought along a group of Samoan dancers to the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. He wrote the book "Some recollections of early Samoa." It emerged as a diary of important events, including the war in Apia between colonial powers and the natives. He is also known for his book about the author Robert Louis Stevenson that spent his last four years on Samoa. H. J. Moors let him and his family stay with him for a while until a suitable site was found for the beautiful mansion that he had built. Today the mansion is a

museum and a popular tourist attraction but it has previously also served as the residence for the governor.

Del 4.

The latest news regarding the Seladon from USA: A remarkable “The Tall Ships Races” in India.

Håkon Sødal the organist at the seaman’s church in San Francisco that received the English edition of the book asked if there was a connection between the Seladon and San Francisco. He had information that Captain Jæger's two sons settled there. Soon after, Håkon Sødal, by coincidence established contact with Howard Bergmark who is a grandchild of Otto Jæger, the son of Captain Jæger. Bergmark was overjoyed over reading the story about the Seladon in his own language and to establish contact with Captain Jægers family and relatives in Norway. Howard has in his possession a silver cup that Captain Jæger received when he was first in a regatta in India.

FIRST PRIZE
PRESENTED TO
CAPT. A.E.JAEGER
BY THE MEMBERS OF THE
BOAT RACING CLUB OF
PORT BLAIR
2-3-95

The Seladon sailed in ballast to India in 1893, after repairs and refitting of a new rig in England in 1892. Abraham Tjelta stood at the helm when the Seladon collided with a full-rigged German ship in the English Channel. Abraham and the “look out” testified 5 times in the London maritime court, the German ship was held accountable for the incident and the ship-owners received a substantial compensation. The hole in the side of the Seladon was so big that it was said that you could drive a load of hay through it. The Seladon’s figurehead which had been broken off and left on board the German ship was inspected by Abraham and Captain Jæger; they concluded that it was beyond repair.

Some more news from the previously unknown interview with Abraham:
The map became wet and tattered because the swells broke in over the lifeboats. The compass was of no use in the choppy movements of a lifeboat. The map was completely unusable after the unsuccessful attempt to find the Christmas islands.

The answer to why they had so little food with them in the lifeboats may be explained here: The rig crashed down upon us, it was time to ready the lifeboats. Everything happened so fast that the steward only had time to bring along whatever he had of supplies in the galley, over to the lifeboats. He did try to get aft after more supplies, but the fallen rig was almost impossible to pass. When the steward finally reached the supply room, the ship was so twisted and damaged that it was impossible to open the door.

The interview with Abraham Tjelta was made by Bjarne Gullichsen in about 1947. A copy was received from Mons Arne Grøsvik of the Wyverns Friendship Society. There is a re-print in the magazine "Flaggruten" of March 14. 1996 The picture of Abraham is taken by Johan Aakre from Egersund and was recently sent to me from Aakre as a .pdf file.

A story by Wincent Rege February 20. 2013