

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,
vol 20. Editor: Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Drummond, Emily & Johnny Rudolph. 2021. Nukuoro (Nukuoro Atoll, Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia) - Language Snapshot. *Language Documentation and Description* 20, 145-153.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/232>

This electronic version first published: December 2021



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Nukuoro (Nukuoro Atoll, Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia) - Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Nukuoro
Language Family:	Polynesian
ISO 639-3 Code:	nkr
Glottolog Code:	nuku1260
Population:	1,200
Location:	3.845255, 154.942057
Vitality rating:	endangered

Summary

Nukuoro is an endangered Polynesian Outlier language spoken on Nukuoro Atoll, an outer island of Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia. While Nukuoro is acquired as a first language by children and widely spoken in the home, nearly all speakers are multilingual in Pohnpeian, the local lingua franca, and English. Diasporic migration for education and employment has led Nukuoro speakers to settle all over the world, with large communities living in Kolonia, Pohnpei and the United States, particularly in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Oregon. As a result, the Nukuoro diaspora community is at least seven times larger than the in-situ community on the atoll. This distribution of speakers places particular challenges on language vitality, especially in smaller communities in the U.S. There are ongoing efforts to document and revitalize Nukuoro language and culture, and speakers have turned to online resources to connect across the globe.

De mee laumalie

Muna Nuguolo ni muna mai i baasanga o muna o henua i ngaage nei (Polynesia), e pasa ai de gau Nukuoro gai e hagadagadaga de llilo mai ilotenga masovaa gu hulo. Nukuoro go dahi modu maasei i daha o Pohnpei State, Federated States of Micronesia. Denga gauligi e pasa Nukuoro i olaadeu hale. Soa de gau Nukuoro anailaanei gu hilo denga muna Pohnpei aama muna abasasa aama muna Nukuoro mae pasa ai. Go hiidinga o skuulu aamade sala hegau ne hidi ai de gau Nukuoro ide hulo ga nnoho i momme saaele laa henua i lalo. Gau Nukuoro soa e nnoho i Kolonia, Pohnpei aama de United States, gilaadeu e nnoho i North Carolina, South Carolina and Oregon. Hagasaaele ange bolo se hidu naa hanonga o dangada gu hulo gee mai i Nukuoro e soa ange ai i gilaadeu dangada e nnoho i hongga Nukuoro anailaanei. De nnoho geegee ode gau Nukuoro bee nei e hidi ai de haingadaa ide daaohi muna Nukuoro gi de llilo gai go olaadeu daha donu de gau Nukuoro e noho dagi de momo saaele nei laa daha o Nukuoro. Gu hanu hegau gu hagaseese e i lodo laangi nei e bale ai de daaohi muna made baasanga o muna aama tahulinga o Nukuoro. Dangada gu maua ide hulo ga tilo hegau nei online e dee hilihili de momme o dahi ma dahi iai.

1. Introduction

Nukuoro is a Polynesian language spoken on Nukuoro Atoll, a low-lying coral island 480 km southwest of Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia (Figure 1). It is the northernmost of the Polynesian Outliers, a group of Polynesian languages that are spoken outside of the Polynesian Triangle; for a review of the literature on Outlier languages and cultures, see Feinberg & Scaglione (2012). Nukuoro is one of only two Polynesian languages found in Micronesia alongside Kapingamarangi, its closest linguistic relative, which is spoken on a neighboring atoll. Polynesian languages belong to the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian language family (Marck 2000). Within Polynesian, Nukuoro is part of the Nuclear Polynesian subgroup, which contains all Polynesian languages aside from Tongan and Niuean. Further subgrouping of Nukuoro and other Outlier languages, particularly in relation to Eastern Polynesian, is the subject of ongoing research (see Wilson 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021; Walworth & Davletshin 2019; Walworth et al. in prep).



Figure 1: Location of Nukuoro Atoll in the Pacific

Source: Australian National University, CC BY-SA 4.0. Edited from original.

Based on our estimates, there are approximately 1,200 Nukuoro speakers worldwide. About 150 speakers reside on Nukuoro Atoll, while nearly 800 live in the state capital of Kolonia, Pohnpei. At least 250 speakers live in diaspora communities elsewhere around the world, with growing populations in Guam and the mainland United States. The largest Nukuoro communities in the U.S. are found in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Oregon, but speakers also reside in Hawai'i, California, Kansas, Arkansas, Texas, and other states. It is worth noting that the Nukuoro populations in Guam and the U.S. certainly total more than 250 people; however, it is likely that many of these residents do not speak Nukuoro fluently.

While Nukuoro is the primary language spoken on Nukuoro Atoll, almost all speakers living on Pohnpei are multilingual in Pohnpeian and English. On Pohnpei, which has the largest concentration of speakers, Nukuoro is typically used in the home and at community events. Outside of the home, speakers code-switch between Nukuoro and Pohnpeian, or speak Pohnpeian entirely. Education on the atoll is conducted in English, Nukuoro, and Pohnpeian; on Pohnpei, students are only taught in Pohnpeian and English. Nukuoroans living abroad in Guam and the U.S. report that children in these communities grow up speaking little to no Nukuoro.

2. Nukuoro geography, culture, and history

Nukuoro Atoll is a chain of islets that sits atop an almost circular coral reef (Figure 2). There are 46 original islets according to *Tau o denga modu* 'the chant of the islets'; some of these islets have washed away in recent years, others have been joined together by the currents, and yet others were constructed by humans (Carroll 1963). Most Nukuoro Atoll residents live on the largest islet, Nukuoro, which is colloquially called *Hale* 'house'. The Nukuoro lagoon is one of the deepest lagoons in Micronesia; it is a natural environment for *baa* 'black pearl', which grows abundantly in the lagoon.

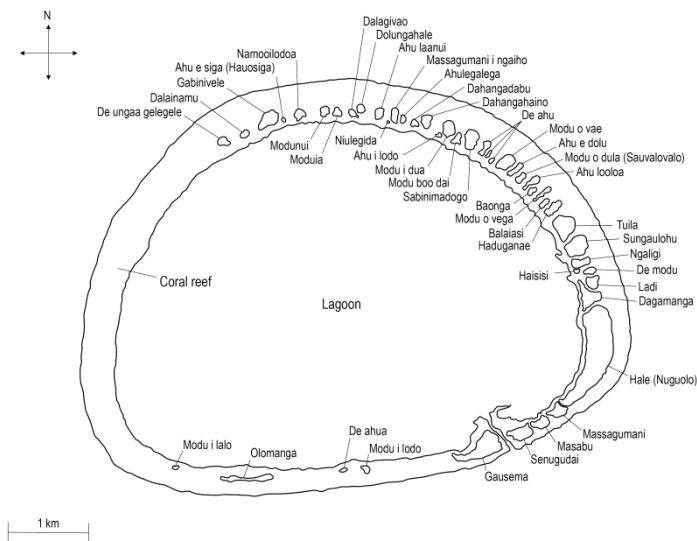


Figure 2: Map of Nukuoro Atoll with islet names, adapted from Carroll (1963).

The atoll is quite remote; there is no airstrip, so it is only accessible by boat. A large passenger vessel travels between Pohnpei and its southern outer islands every two to three months, stopping at Sapwafik, Nukuoro, and Kapingamarangi atolls before returning to Pohnpei. The journey to Nukuoro takes about three days.

Daily life on the atoll centers around taro production and fishing, as well as traditional handicrafts like carving, traditionally done by men, and weaving of coconut and pandanus fronds, traditionally done by women. Historically, taro patches were found on the main islet as well as Gausema, Serugudai, Dagamanga, and Sungaulohu, and these were traditionally divided into smaller portions allocated to each family. Within the last fifty years, however, the taro patches have shrunk due to saltwater intrusion and lack of

fertilization; as a result, residents of Nukuoro Atoll have increasingly relied on imported food, such as rice and canned meat.

Nukuoro has a rich oral tradition of chants and narratives, which situates the culture and the language within the larger Polynesian and Micronesian context. It is said that the atoll's coral reef was created by a family of deities who planted a black pearl in the ocean; subsequently, a ghost named Sogo walked around the reef, unknowingly leaking sand from his basket to create the islets (Drummond, Rudolph & Harrison 2019). The atoll was later settled by Sāmoan migrants led by Vave, the ousted son of the king of Manu'a. There are five original clans of Nukuoro, namely *sekave*, *seala*, *sehege*, *sehena*, and *seolo*, and Nukuoro religion was organized around the *malae* (Proto-Polynesian *malage), a designated sacred place for worship and community gathering. Carvers would create figurines called *tino eidu* 'spirit body', symbolizing deities and spirits; these Nukuoro figurines are renowned among art collectors for their distinctive shape and beauty (Kaufman & Wick 2013).

The history of Nukuoro is punctuated by contact with other groups, including interactions with other Pacific island communities and colonization by Germany, Japan, and the United States. In the pre-colonial period, Nukuoro oral traditions recount many visitors from other island nations, including the Mortlock Islands, Marshall Islands, Gilbert Islands, Fiji, and Palau. Nukuoro Atoll appears on European maps in 1806, with detailed records of early European contact coming from German sources between 1870 and 1913. During the German administration, Nukuoroans largely converted to Protestantism, a Christian church was built, and many goods associated with the former religion, such as carvings and idols, were thrown into the sea. In the 1920s, Japan gained control of German territories in Micronesia, including Pohnpei and Nukuoro. During this time, the Japanese enslaved Nukuoro men to build roads on Pohnpei, where many of them died. In 1947, the United Nations created the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which was overseen by the United States. In 1961, the Nukuoro Municipal Government was chartered, and in 1979, Nukuoro was included within the semi-autonomous state of Pohnpei when the Federated States of Micronesia was instituted as an independent nation.

Historically, the Nukuoro language was spoken by everyone in the community until migration away from the atoll began in earnest in the late 20th century. Before this migration, it was common for speakers to be multilingual in other languages of the region, such as Kapingamarangi, Chuukese, and Marshallese, primarily due to intermarriage; it was also common for Nukuoroans to learn the languages of occupying colonial powers, such as German, Japanese, and English. A Western-style elementary school was established on Nukuoro Atoll in the early 1960s, which educates children from first through eighth grade. Further education is only available in Pohnpei and Chuuk. When students began to travel to Pohnpei to attend high school in the 1970s, parents migrated with them; furthermore, during the early 1990s,

the shrinking taro patch became unable to support the population, and families moved to Pohnpei for sustenance and to secure jobs. Today, there is continuous migration from Nukuoro to Pohnpei, and in turn, families in Pohnpei have begun migrating to Guam and the U.S. This migration, combined with economic and social pressure, has had drastic effects on Nukuoro language use. Only a handful of Nukuoro elders are monolingual in Nukuoro. Most people speak a mixed language of Nukuoro and Pohnpeian or have shifted to speaking Pohnpeian and English. In particular, the youngest generations of Nukuoro children are English-dominant, and shift to English has resulted in a number of English loans and calques in modern Nukuoro. English use in the community appears to be correlated with level of education, with high school and college graduates using more English in the home.

Many community members are literate in Nukuoro, due in part to the establishment of a standardized orthography by the last traditional chief, Leka, in the 1920s. Written literature in the Nukuoro language includes a Nukuoro translation of the Bible compiled by Betty Amon, a number of Nukuoro narratives (Carroll 1965b and Carroll 1980, among others), a Nukuoro-English phrasebook (Taboroši et al. forthcoming), and various handwritten family histories and traditional medicines. Nukuoro is also used on social media sites, such as Facebook, where it is often used alongside Pohnpeian and English.

3. Existing literature

The earliest written records of Nukuoro were created by German travelers and missionaries at the turn of the 20th century, most notably Johann Stanislaus Kubary (Theode-Arora 2013), Carl Jeschke (1913), and Anneliese Eilers (1934). The content of these texts is translated and editorialized in Kaufmann & Wick (2013), an edited volume on the Nukuoro *tino eidu* statues. Early descriptive work on the language includes two wordlists, one by F. W. Christian in 1898, and one by Samuel Elbert in 1946. The most extensive linguistic work on Nukuoro was carried out from 1963-1966 by Vern Carroll, an anthropology PhD student at the University of Chicago, his wife Raymonde Carroll, and many Nukuoro collaborators, including extensive work by Tobias Soulik. Their combined output forms the core descriptive materials on the Nukuoro language, including a lexicon (Carroll & Soulik 1973), a sketch grammar (Carroll 1965a), traditional narratives (Carroll 1965b, Carroll 1980), and an account of place names on Nukuoro Atoll (Carroll 1963). Vern Carroll published on ethnographic topics as well, including Nukuoro kinship (Carroll 1966) and adoption practices (Carroll 1970).

Nukuoro shows a number of typologically unusual linguistic features. First, all Nukuoro consonant phonemes are contrastive for length in word-

initial position, a common feature of the Polynesian Outliers (Blust 2007). Unstressed vowels undergo syncope between identical consonants, yielding geminates word-initially and at morphological boundaries: for example, *po-podo > /ppodo/ 'short (pl)' and *haka-kaukau > /hakkaukau/ 'bathe (someone)'. Second, Nukuoro uses basic SVO word order and shows no morphological case marking except for genitive. These gemination, word order, and case marking properties likely arose due to contact with non-Polynesian languages. Our theoretical work on Nukuoro has also identified a pattern of syntactic ergativity: relativizing a transitive subject requires the verb to appear with the suffix *-(C)ia* plus the post-verbal particle *ina* (Drummond 2021). The presence of syntactic ergativity without morphological ergativity has been claimed to be unattested (Dixon 1994), making Nukuoro an exception to this typological generalization.

4. Ongoing work

K. David Harrison and Gregory Anderson created the Nukuoro Talking Dictionary¹ in 2013; this is an online audio-visual dictionary which features recordings from Nukuoro speakers (Drummond et al. 2016). It was during this project that the two authors were introduced, which has sparked an ongoing collaboration. In 2015 we founded the Nukuoro Documentation Project, an initiative to: (i) connect speakers with existing resources; (ii) connect speakers with each other; and (iii) create new resources and spaces to document and revitalize Nukuoro language and culture. To complement the Talking Dictionary, we created a website² and a YouTube channel³ to house our documentary materials. Field materials from this project can be found in an open-access archival collection at the *California Language Archive*⁴ housed at UC Berkeley. Finally, we are organizing a series of cultural workshops and online classes dedicated to documenting and teaching Nukuoro language and culture, the first of which took place in Kolonia, Pohnpei in June 2021 and the second of which was held on Nukuoro Atoll in September 2021.

¹ <http://talkingdictionary.swarthmore.edu/nukuoro>, accessed 2021-08-26

² <http://nukuoro.org>, accessed 2021-08-26

³ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtFCUwckvy_55caT7CoQ4Lg, accessed 2021-08-26

⁴ <http://cla.berkeley.edu>, accessed 2021-08-26

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