

## Is Vagahau Niue an Endangered Language?

A high-level Niue Member of Parliament in 2005 floated a comment in the community that 'Vagahau Niue is waiving goodbye at us'. The comment was based on UNESCO's assessment of the World's Endangered Languages which Vagahau Niue happened to be severely endangered. The comment was not taken lightly and Tāoga Niue questioned the assessment and true status of Vagahau Niue. It was felt that we need to do our own research and revert the comment, because dynamically in 2005 the majority of our people were still speaking Vagahau Niue.

First the year was declared as the Niue Year for Vagahau Niue and in 2006 and for the first time, questionnaires to the use of Vagahau Niue were included in the Niue Census. Data collected from the last three census revealed as follows:

In 2006 just over 86% of the population claim to speak Niuean fluently, total population was 1,625. In 2011, it was 80%, and a population of 1,053. In 2017 and the 1,485 of resident population, 72% claim to be proficient in speaking Vagahau Niue.

Also important to the discussion is data from the New Zealand Census of 2013 where 23,880 identified as Niue persons, only 4,335 or 18.7% can speak fluent Vagahau Niue. (In the 2006 Census it was 23.7%). The 2018 New Zealand Census stats revealed that only 4,182 people can speak Vagahau Niue from a population of approximately 30,000 people.

Is Vagahau Niue an endangered language? Current statistics are against us and perhaps we thought, 50 years ago our main focus on economic development and social initiatives and demands would not affect Vagahau Niue, now we know that was a mistaken assumption.

So, what we can do to revert the comment made in 2005? The responsibility rests with every Niue person and how we appreciate our *tāoga*, our Niue values and who we are. Pouring endless financial assistance to slow the trend or develop sophisticated programmes like on-line platforms are not the main answers to the stats in front of us. We all need to practice what we preach – Vagahau Niue starts from the home and from the stage when a child is conceived. When this process is intervened and replaced by unstructured modern systems or with the introduction and incomplete vocabulary of the English language or before a child attended his or her very first kindergarten class, the child will grow up confused but will adapt to the sophistications of the outside world and not Vagahau Niue.

The author of this article is proficient in both oral and written Vagahau Niue; the statement of our language waving goodbye at us is a signal to stop what we are doing

and start the conversation at home with our children and amongst ourselves as a family. You can also start your day by visiting the Vagahau Niue page (<https://taoganiue.nu/vagahau-niue/>) to start your day or contact Tāoga Niue for a conversation in Vagahau Niue on any matters of common interest. Take particular interest in listening to Vagahau Niue announcements on air, attend Sunday church services conducted in full Vagahau Niue and attend formal gatherings or sing along to Niue songs and hymns which are readily available from Radio Sunshine, you will be surprised to learn the richness of our *vagahau*. Pragmatic discussions must take precedent as a way forward to shelve away the comment and to lift ourselves from the endangered list.