RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE:

WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TONGA

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INTRODUCTION

In September 1995 I arrived, as a graduate student, in the Kingdom of Tonga, South Pacific, to conduct archaeological surveys and excavations under the auspices of Simon Fraser University (SFU). I was in the company of two other SFU archaeologists, David V. Burley, the principal investigator, and Rob Shortland, another graduate student. Other researchers from Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand periodically joined us for varying lengths of time.

Tonga is on the western edge of what is termed the “Polynesian Triangle”, which extends in its broadest expanse from Hawaii to New Zealand to Easter Island. There are more than 160 islands comprising Tonga today, encompassing an area 750 km long by 150-175 km wide (see map). The islands are aligned along a southwest to northeast axis and are composed of both high volcanic islands and islands of coral limestone. The islands in the Vava’u Group to the north are high islands, while the central islands of Ha’apai, for the most part, are low coral islands. Tongatapu, to the south, is considered the third group, and includes the largest of all the islands (also called Tongatapu). All of the islands are located along parallel submarine ridges that are separated by the Tofua Trough (Burley 1996, Dickinson 1996). To the east of the island forearc is the Tongan Trench, the deepest portion of which extends to a depth of 10,942 meters (6.74 miles), making it the deepest ocean trench in the Southern Hemisphere (Wright et al., 1998). To the west of the main islands of Ha’apai is an active volcanic area that includes the island of Tofua, made famous as the site of the HMS Bounty mutiny in 1789.
Throughout my stay in Tonga, I was able to casually observe and interact with a variety of Tongans, including Tongan women. It became quickly apparent that women’s activities differed from men’s. Furthermore, women performed different activities based upon both kinship and socio-economic distinctions. This paper examines those differences by placing them in a historical context and analyzing them from the perspective of political economy. I strongly adhere to the analytical perspective that argues economy “is always political, and relations of production are about people’s relations to each other by their respective relations to the means of production” (Sacks 1982:108). To investigate women’s role(s) in the Tongan political economy requires an examination of Tongan social, political and economic organization at the time of contact with the first European explorers in the Pacific. I will also describe how Tonga subsequently adapted and changed, including discussion of the current political and economic conditions in the country. That is the intent and scope of this paper, but I begin with two preliminary steps.

The first step is a brief review of my stay in Tonga and some of my initial impressions. This is entirely based on my recollections and the personal journal I maintained while in Tonga. It contextualizes the issues I confront in the body of the paper. The second preliminary task is to very briefly present and explain a mode of production schematic that provides an organization for my analysis. It is designed to serve as a structural means (in a compositional sense) to compare and contrast prehistoric, protohistoric (contact) and post-contact Tongan political economy.
My first week in Tonga was spent on the main island of Tongatapu, in the capital, Nuku’alofa. We stayed in a guesthouse operated by a Tongan family. Such guesthouses are essentially family-run “bed and breakfast” establishments that cater to a relatively small tourist trade. Guesthouses offer inexpensive accommodations for vacationing travelers or foreign aid workers on holiday. In this case the family included a woman (Konai¹, after whom the guesthouse was named), her husband and their adolescent children. This guesthouse was reasonably large, offering 18 double rooms, including an upstairs apartment (where the SFU crew stayed) (Wolf 1995²).

Konai was clearly the manager of the establishment. She was the focal point of our dealings with the guesthouse. The only time I recall seeing her husband was when the water pump from the cistern malfunctioned and he worked with his son to repair it. Otherwise, it was Konai’s daughters who prepared and served breakfast and performed other routine chores in the guesthouse.

The guesthouse was about a mile and a half from the “downtown” area and we would walk there (or take a taxi) once or twice a day. There were women engaged in wage labor in the various shops, stores and the few hotels in Nuku’alofa. The International Dateline Hotel is much like any hotel, with “Holiday Inn” style furnishings, a pool, restaurant and bar. Women worked at the front desk, waited tables, and performed routine housekeeping duties. Most of our formal dealings with the Tongan government bureaucracy also involved interactions with women, who staffed the Visa Office and the

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¹ All Tongan personal names from my journal have been changed.
² Unless otherwise noted my journal serves as the primary reference for this section.
Office of the Prime Minister. The only time I was “waited on” by a male, was in an ice cream parlor/espresso bar and that was by the owner, an Italian ex-patriate.

There were two other women of particular note that we met while in Nuku’alofa. They were American anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler and another American woman who was married to Motuapuaka³, the ceremonial attendant to the King. He also commands the King’s rowers. Kaeppler and the wife of Motuapuaka served as intermediaries between one of the Royal Princesses and us, as the Princess wanted a favor.

Specifically, we were asked to survey and map a cemetery in the village of Kolovai, also on Tongatapu. The higher (in elevation) and more central an entombment, the higher the rank of the entombed. The Princess wanted to know the precise placement of graves in the cemetery. It was a task Tongans were loath to perform, as they prefer not to loiter in cemeteries. All I was told was that the information would be used in resolving future issues of Royal succession.⁴

Throughout our surveying we were under the watchful eye of the matapule, a local man who represents and serves the interests of the King. He was there to make certain that we comported ourselves properly and did nothing to desecrate the graves. Whenever possible we avoided walking or standing on a grave. Rob and I would normally use hand signals when surveying, but in this situation, if we needed to speak we would move closer and speak softly. Two other older men initially observed us. They

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³ “Motuapuaka” translates as “old pig” and is the title given to the King’s ceremonial attendant. Motuapuaka sits next to the King’s right hand in the Royal Kava Circle.
⁴ I was a bit uncomfortable performing this “service” because it seemed to be intruding in local politics. However, I had no say in this decision and Burley felt we could not deny a royal request.
watched us for about 45 minutes with arms folded, but once seemingly satisfied that we were well behaved, they left us.

Our acceptance seemed complete when several Tongan men who had been preparing a new grave took their lunch break. They had a dozen or so coconuts and they offered one each to Rob and me. The coconut “water” was cool, sweet and refreshing. When one of the men saw me eating the gelatinous interior with my fingers, he took his machete, split the coconut and fashioned a spoon-like scraper from the inner husk.

After six days on Tongatapu we traveled to the Ha’apai Island Group, where we were to do most of our work. Burley and Shortland flew to the island of Lifuka, while I accompanied our equipment on a leisurely eleven hours cruise on a converted Chinese riverboat that the People’s Republic of China had donated to the Tongan government. Although my journey was on calm seas and was uneventful, the boat is sometimes referred to as the “Vomit Comet”. It is the cheapest form of public transportation from Tongatapu to the northern islands. Most tourists, government officials, and businessmen fly on Royal Tongan Airlines.

Pangai, in the central Ha’apai islands, is very different than Nuku’alofa and can only be termed a “village” albeit the largest on the island of Lifuka. There is no large hotel or large commercial establishment. There is a branch of the Bank of Tonga, a hardware store, a food co-op, a small bookstore, a Shell Oil Company station, a couple of restaurants, and the small Niu’akalo Hotel (referred to locally as the hotele) which serves as the only bar on the island. Women work in the bank, the co-op and the hotel. They also sell food and other very basic items from the ubiquitous falekolos that dot the villages. These are small (some no more than 9 feet by 12 feet) “mom and pop” type stores that
maintain very irregular hours. With few exceptions a customer does not enter the
falekoloā, but goes to the raised clapboard window (much like a concession stand). At the
time of my stay, there were also two small video stores, as Tongans are enthusiastically
connected to the rest of the world via satellite television and VCRs.

In Pangai, we had our own house (fale), of typical contemporary Tongan design
(single-wall, wood frame construction on a concrete slab foundation). We were located
across from the Wesleyan Methodist school and were the only palangis (foreigners) in
the immediate neighborhood. Unless working as a civil servant in the post office,
teaching school, working in the bank or clerking at a falekoloā, most women were
engaged in daily household chores. Men were generally engaged in either working on the
construction of the wharf or laboring in their bush api (allocated agricultural land).

The house in which we lived belonged to a married couple who were in the
United States working to earn their “green cards”. The family was not royal, but was
highly ranked and respected, an ancestor being the first Tongan Christian missionary (a
Wesleyan Methodist). In addition to the eldest brother in the U.S., another brother
managed the Shell Oil distributorship, and the third was a high-ranking officer in the
Royal Tongan Navy. The eldest sister (Meleane) was delegated the task of seeing after
our needs. Without her assistance we would have been immersed in a logistical morass.
She did not work in the wage labor sector at all, as far as I could determine, but she was
always busy, if not looking after us palangis, then organizing the dance, parties, and

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5 My first week in Panagai, I attended a village dance, but the music was heavy metal, rock-and-roll and
played at deafening decibel levels. Most of the attendees were teenagers or young adults. When one young
man learned that I was born in Chicago he pantomimed a machinegun. I asked where he had learned about
machine guns and he said from watching movies. Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger are very
popular, but neither as much so as Jean Claude Van Damme.
feasts that occurred while we were there. In addition, she performed and directed a
variety of household chores. She had several female relatives that she recruited to also
assist us. Two of them (and Meleane) helped me, by cleaning and preparing the marine
shell remains for my laboratory analysis.

Lavinia was in marked contrast to Meleane. Lavinia actually worked as part of
our excavation crew at the Tongoleleka Site on Lifuka. Lavinia was poor – very poor,
and unmarried, although she had at least one child. One of our male Tongan
crewmembers was initially reluctant to have Lavinia working with us. Clearly, he viewed
her as intruding in “men’s work.” However, he was below Meleane in rank and when he
balked, Meleane had a talk with him (which none of us palangis witnessed). He never
complained openly again.

What I have attempted to do in this section is to provide an overview of the
specific personal experiences of my time in Tonga that relate to issues of political
economy. I will return to those issues later in this paper, as I attempt to explain the
contemporary Tongan political economy. However, beyond the personal observations my
professional research was focused on analyzing the “prehistoric” (I prefer “pre-contact
with Europeans”) exploitation of the marine mollusk resource of Ha’apai. At the time of
contact and in the contemporary period, harvesting shellfish was (and is) exclusively a
task performed by women (Spennemann 1990). As an example of how a particular set of
tasks was organized, it was one of several productive strategies of the mode of production
operating in pre- and post-contact Tonga.
MODE OF PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL FORMATION

The schematic that I intend to use in my analysis of the Tongan mode of production is produced below. I define “social formation” as “mode of production” and vice versa. They are terms that are mutually interchangeable and are composed of the same elements. There are two basic components comprising the Mode of Production (Social Formation) – infrastructure and superstructure. I will discuss both in my analysis of Tongan social formation, but my own view is that the material component (infrastructure) is the more fundamental of the two. I recognize that not all theoreticians agree, but I do not intend to join the issue in this paper.

The infrastructure (or base) is composed of two elements, the “forces of production” and the “relations of production”. The “forces of production”, in turn, include both the “organization of production” and the “means of production”. “Organization of production” is simply a description of who labors at what tasks. For
instance, for the purposes of this paper, are there particular productive tasks (work) that are performed by women and not men (or men and not women)?

“Means of production” include all the various tools and raw materials necessary for production. This includes land and landscape, and in an island environment such as Tonga, the sea and seascape. Spade hoes used for tilling the earth, seeds or plant cuttings used for cultivation, boats, fishing gear, shell collection baskets, etc., all comprise parts of the means of production. The plots of land used to grow crops, the sand and reef flats where shellfish are collected, and the fishing grounds where fish are captured, are also parts of the means of production.

“Relations of the production” seems so simple to define but also perplexes some. In the simplest definition it is the answer to the question: “Who controls production?” In other words, who decides how and when productive activities will take place? Does a “big man” decide? Does a titleholder decide? Does a chief decide? Does the laborer (producer) decide? However, it is more than determining who controls production. There is also the question of distribution. I do not believe that the two – production and distribution – can be separated. Each implies the other and a better term might be the “relations of production and distribution.” Does a kin group control production and distribution? Does a chief control production and distribution? Does a particular class control production and distribution? These are the questions that must be answered because differing modes of production (or social formations) lend different answers (Cohen 1982, Keenan 1981, Roseberry 1997).

The superstructure includes ideological beliefs, which are composed of religion and other supernatural belief systems and ethical standards. The other component of the
superstructure includes the legal and political institutions of a society. Courts, privy
councils, political parties, legislative bodies, “the elders”, etc., are all examples of such
institutions. The materialist view (which I admittedly hold) sees the components of the
superstructure as being flexible and dynamic mechanisms for maintaining the mode of
production (Cohen 1982). Most importantly the superstructure is a means by which
relations of production can be justified. We need a better term than “superstructure”,
which implies “on top of” everything else. Perhaps “support structure” or “reinforcement
mechanism” would be more descriptive, if not as “catchy” as “superstructure.”

What I intend to do in the remainder of this paper is to examine Tongan history
(and to some extent “prehistory”) in terms of the components of the infrastructure and
superstructure. Such an examination should reveal the transition from one mode of
production to another. The ultimate question is how has Tongan society adjusted to an
inescapable relationship with today’s worldwide dominant mode of production –
capitalism? What have been the points of articulation? What have been the facies of
conflict? What has been negotiated between (or among) differing modes of production?
What is the contemporary synthesis?

Those questions are important for a theoretical and material understanding of
changes in Tongan society, but there are even more important questions. Political
economic analysis is a fundamentally useless academic exercise unless it reveals
something profound about the lives of real people. That is what I will attempt to address
in my discussion of the contemporary political economy. Tongan kinship is complicated
and instrumental to understanding Tongan social and political organization and will be
discussed in the section on Tongan society at, and immediately following, contact with Europeans.

**TONGAN POLITICAL ECONOMY & GENDER: PRE-CONTACT**

Archaeologists make a living by making large conclusions from little evidence. Our gaze through the looking glass of time can be distorted and we take great pains to analyze, quantify, test and qualify our conclusions. Determining the means of production from the archaeological record is much easier than determining the organization or relations of production. Material remains of the means of production (fishhooks, grinding stones, scrapers, projectile points, net weights) can tell us much about what activities are taking place, but we must apply additional analytical tools of our own to ascertain who performed a task and who organized or controlled that task.

One analytical approach is to review all the documentary material prepared by early European explorers and retro-extrapolate from them into the “prehistoric” past. This approach is made more difficult (and probably more inaccurate) by the fact that the documentary record is a social product itself (Spennemann 1990). Early male explorers carried with them their own perceptions of gender roles, which colored their reports, often emphasizing male activities (hunting, fishing, fighting) at the expense of a detailed examination of women’s activities (Spennemann 1990). Furthermore, interactions were often with the chiefly “class” rather than with commoners (Gailey 1987). This makes understanding the organization of Tongan society at the time of contact difficult enough, without trying to work backward in time from it.
However, there is a partial solution through the application of physical anthropology and human osteology. Repeated physical activities leave evidence on skeletal remains. For instance, human remains from a burial mound on Tongatapu (dated to 1200-1500 AD) showed differences in the condition of the males and females. The male skeletons showed significant osteoarthritis in the neck region of the vertebral columns, but little arthritis in the thoracic and lumbar regions. The female skeletons showed virtually no arthritis in the neck region, but a high percentage of arthritis in the lower spine. The arthritis found in the upper neck region of the males is consistent with other findings associating this type of “wear and tear” with the motions of repetitive, strong and forceful motion related to canoe paddling (Spennemann 1990). Long and medium distance canoe paddling was done by men who were on fishing expeditions, trading with other islands, or warring with other islands.

Tapa production and mat or basketry weaving is done generally while in a squat or in a seated position, which does not stress the lower back. Researchers have long agreed that only women produced tapa (Gailey 1987, Koojiman 1992). Shellfishing techniques depend on the substrate of the harvest zone. On mudflats women stand in the water and explore the mud with their toes or sit in the water and search with their hands. However, on the reefs search and collection is performed standing and repeatedly bending at the waist and turning over stones in search for the mollusks. As shellfishing was an exclusive female production activity, the skeletal pathology in the lower spine should be expected.

On the other hand the condition of the female skeletal material raises doubts that women did not engage in labor in the gardens. Of all the gardening activities (clearing,
digging and planting, hoeing and weeding, and harvesting), weeding is the one activity that is routinely done repetitively and for significant duration with the upper body bent at the waist. This directly stresses the lower back. The other activity that directly stresses the lower back is carrying heavy loads. Therefore, the condition of the female skeletons, in comparison to that of the males, suggests that they were engaging in activities that were stressing the lower back. If the male skeletons show little or no signs of lower back stress, then one must conclude that certain gardening activities were being performed by women (weeding and transporting produce) (Spennemann 1990).

Perhaps the early explorers and missionaries were correct that chiefly or highly ranked women did not work in gardens. One missionary wife reported that commoner’s wives did work in the gardens and that the elite women did not do so, thus freeing the latter to master the art of tapa design and mat making (Spenneman 1990). Koloa means “wealth” and is the term used to describe tapa cloth and mats. The higher the rank of the woman, who produced the koloa, the greater its value was. If the elite need not labor in the fields because their subsistence needs were being met through either kin obligations or a tributary system, they could invest their time and energy producing koloa. How gender roles might have changed following contact will be explored in the next section. But what mode of production was operating before contact?

Tonga was initially occupied by about 3000 BP (1000 BC) by what have been termed “Lapita peoples.” “Lapita” is derived from the name of a site in New Caledonia and refers to the dentate-stamp markings found on pottery associated with these early explorers and colonizers of the Pacific Ocean (Burley 1998). Within 150 years the Lapita pottery was no longer manufactured. Plainware pottery would disappear and when the
Europeans arrived in Tonga (first in 1616) (Ferdon 1987), there was no Tongan recollection of a pottery tradition (Burley 1998).

The first chiefly genealogy begins in the mid-eleventh century AD. At that time Tongan chiefs were extracting tribute from neighboring island groups (Fiji, Samoa, and Rotuma). Tongan society was divided into two distinct ranked groups – chiefly and non-chiefly. Whether considered an estate, order, or class, the society was stratified and the chiefly strata aggressively strove to consolidate authority in a ruling class. Everybody had a rank relative to every one else. Kin groups were also ranked relative to one another. No one shared the same rank and women of high rank (female chiefs) were socially important (Gailey 1987, 1992).

By the 15th Century the Tongan empire had collapsed. The tribute extracted from the conquered islands underscores the imperial nature of the Tongan polity. The kinship links between the chiefly and non-chiefly strata were so strong, that tribute could not be collected at home. This would have violated the kin-centered rules of reciprocity. Instead, Tonga advanced outward militarily and extracted tribute from the conquered (Gailey 1992). This is not to say efforts were not made to extract tribute from Tongans, only that it was not particularly successful. The 11th *Tu‘i Tonga* (the sacred paramount chief) attempted to do so around 1200 AD (Gailey 1987). He is said to have raped his virgin sister. In a bilateral kinship structure such as Tonga’s, such a rape (or marriage) would signal an attempt by the highest-ranking kin group to sever the marital obligations to the lower ranking groups. Because the narratives describing this event use the term “rape”

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6 This suggests that a core-periphery analysis could be applied to the Tongan empire. “World System” need not equate to “global” if one means “known” world.
and are given a negative characterization, it appears likely that such efforts were opposed by collateral kin and lower ranking chiefly groups (Gailey 1992).

Around 1450 AD a new paramount chiefly title was created. The prior three *Tu’i Tongas* had been assassinated and the sacred and administrative functions were split, with the *Tu’i Tonga* retaining the sacred duties (including receiving “first fruits”). The new titled chief, the *Tu’i Ha’a Takalaua*, representing a younger brother branch of the sacred paramount line, assumed all administrative duties. Although the two lines were meant to intermarry, this apparently did not happen often, furthering efforts by lower ranking chiefly groups to frustrate efforts to consolidate power at the top. At the end of the 16th century (or beginning of the 17th) a new female chiefly title was established. This was the *Tamaha*. Prior to this the highest-ranking woman in Tonga was the *Tu’i Tonga’s* eldest sister, the *Tu’i Tonga Fefine*. Now her daughter would become the highest-ranking woman, in an effort to bolster the diminishing power of the sacred chiefly house (Gailey 1992).

Two additional changes would shortly occur. First, another younger-brother branch, this time of the administrative line, the *Tu’i Ha’a Takalaua*, established a new titled position, the *Tu’i Kanokupolu*. At the same time the *Tu’i Tonga Fefine* (for the next two generations) took a Fijian husband and her daughter the *Tamaha* married the *Tu’i Kanokupolu* (the paramount of the new administrative line), while the titled sister of the *Tu’i Kanokupolu*, the *Moheofo*, married the sacred chief. A chart helps to clarify this, with the marriage connectors (=) at the ends representing the marriage between the *Moheofo* and the *Tu’i Tonga*. 
This was the structure of the kinship links among the Tongan paramount chiefly groups at the time of contact with European explorers (Gailey 1992).

**Tongan Political Economy & Gender: Contact**

As stratified as Tongan society clearly was at the time Schouten and LeMaire (1616), Tasman (1643), Wallis (1767), and Cook (1773-74) arrived, the mode of production could still be described as “communal” or “kin-based.” The organization of work, the distributions of products of work, the consumption of products, and the reproduction of society were all controlled by kinship and kin obligations. As already shown, the Tongan kinship system at the top of society was complex, convoluted and flexible. No less can be said for the other strata in the society.

Land was held by extended kin groups. These kin groups were cognatic (the *kainga*), with descent being traced bilaterally through male and female lines originating from a brother-sister pair. Despite the significant power of chiefs, the kin groups held use-rights to the land. Although chiefs could call upon commoners for labor and products of that labor, this was a matter of privilege of access rather than control. Chiefs did not control the means of production. Nor did they have the capacity or power to deny subsistence to anyone. The only way one could be denied subsistence (use-rights to productive land) was if a kin *tapu* (taboo) was violated (Gailey 1987, 1992; Stevens 1996).
As I mentioned above, everyone was ranked individually and collectively (Finau 1982). Early reports by European observers were superficial in that they viewed the kinship structure as patrilineal, ignoring bilateral descent and the complex gender relations it produced. For instance a husband was above in rank (‘eiki) to his wife, but below (ta’u) his sister. Older was ‘eiki to younger among brothers or sisters, but not between them. Instead, sisters were ‘eiki to brothers, even older brothers. Brothers deferred to their sisters and spoke softly and respectfully to them (and about them). His children never ignored a father’s sister. She and her children were fahu (“above the law” or “beyond custom”) to her brother and his children (Finau 1982, Gailey 1992).

Collectively lineages were ranked as well, with the highest-ranking chiefly estates referred to as hau. Below these paramount chiefs were the ‘eiki (from which the term for ranking above is derived), which included the untitled lineal and collateral kin. These two groups comprised the ha’a, the topmost descent group of chiefly corporate kindred. Among the non-chiefly estates there were also two categories. First, were the matapules, who were mostly foreign (Fijian, Samoan). They were the non-chiefly attendants and assistants to the chiefs. The lower ranked commoners (tu’as) were everyone else. There is a third questionable category that Gailey (1987) believes is contemporary not “traditional”. The group is referred to as mu’as, who are the offspring of marriages between chiefs and matapules.

The highest ranked males could not marry commoner (tu’a) women, although concubinage was not prohibited. Children of chiefly women and commoners were considered “half-chiefs”, but such children had a higher rank than a child of a chiefly
man and commoner woman. *Matapules* could marry anyone and a *tu’a* woman who married a *matapule* became one (Gailey 1992).

When it came to work there were also gender differences. The word for male products is *ngaue* and means “work”, while women’s products are *koloa*, meaning “wealth”. All cooking was done by *tu’a* men and was considered a low status job. Men also engaged in horticulture, deep-sea fishing, canoe making, and weapons production. They also carried water and collected firewood. Women collected shellfish, caught fish in the lagoon, and as discussed above, may have labored to some extent in the gardens. But the activities that produced *koloa* were mat or basketry weaving and tapa production and decoration. Chiefly men did not “work” at all, not working being one of the status markers of high rank. On the other hand, chiefly women did work at producing *koloa*, because mats and decorated tapa (*ngatu*) were vital to the social status of the lineage. Women were the sole producers of products that were socially valued (Gailey 1987, 1992; James 1990).

Therefore, prior to contact both social authority and the validation of chiefly title was based on women’s activities (*koloa* production), in the case of the former, and kin connections. Until the validation of chiefly title was separated from kinship or social authority was no longer connected to chiefly title, classes could not form.

The arrival of Europeans would serve as a catalyst to undermine the kinship system and introduce class-based distinctions within Tongan society. The primary vectors for the sublimation of kinship and the introduction of class divisions would be merchants and missionaries. Tongan production had been for use and trade within Tongan and abroad Fiji, Samoa, etc.) was meant for consumption. Extracted tribute was also meant
for consumption and not acquisition of wealth. Wealth (koloa) was a product of women’s labor in the production of ngata and mats (Gailey 1992).

Europeans sought, on the other hand, goods that could be traded elsewhere for a profit. Coconut oil, which had been produced for consumption by commoner women, was used to provide smokeless and odorless oil for lighting Tongan fales. However, it was primarily used as an after bath oil and a salve and was scented with sandalwood for chiefly use or with flowers for commoner use. It was valued. Production of the oil was labor intensive and time consuming. Until the expansion of the whaling industry, it would also be used in Europe as a lamp oil. It was also used in cosmetics and soaps. However, Europeans did not want scented oil and they wanted much more than would have been normally produced. Initially, though, the supplies were limited and few chiefs could compel commoner women to produce more. Because firearms could be obtained in exchange, what coconut oil that was produced was unscented and traded to Europeans. Scented oil was produced only after the commodity oil. This production would intensify and shift from women to men after the formation of the Tongan state and the ascension to Taufa’ahau (George I) to the Tongan throne (Gailey 1992).

The importation of firearms intensified the civil wars that were waged at the end of the 18th century and 50 years into the 19th (Gailey 1992, James 1990). The civil wars were about succession and recognition of kinship superiority, until the Europeans added another dimension to the conflict – the ability to gain control of production by force of arms irrespective of kinship. It would be the Wesleyan missionaries who would provide a means to sublimate (if not completely resolve) the contradiction between military might and kinship. The Wesleyans were not the first missionaries to have reached Tonga. The
London Missionary Society had preceded them, but failed in their efforts and had abandoned Tonga.

The Wesleyan strategy was to identify and ally themselves with a powerful chief. Their goal was to convert Tonga to Christianity from the top down. Tonga would be remade (the Wesleyans hoped) to become another stronghold of Christian civilization with a centralized monarchy, a nobility that controlled access to the land and yeoman farmers. The chief they identified (Taufa’ahau) was from Ha’apai and he was baptized in 1831. The missionaries, now with an ally of considerable strength, incited disputes among factions and reprisals against “non-believers”. These non-believers would win a major victory that quieted the fighting for awhile, but French Marist priests arrived in 1842 with designs to convert the Tongans (or at least some of them) to Catholicism. The English residents united with Taufa’ahau to combat the Catholic “Devils”. In 1845 Taufa’ahau, now George I, became king and two years later he requested help from the British. He would eventually wage total campaign against the French and their converts, who would be exiled or forced to convert to the Wesleyan faith.

Those who had been loyal to George I became the beneficiaries of his largesse, for he rewarded their loyalty by distributing estates to them. Most of those so rewarded were of the chiefly ranks, but some matapules were also made hereditary estate holders. Patrilineal primogeniture replaced traditional succession through maternal rank. At the same time as he established a landed gentry, the new king, with the urging of his

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7Pita (Peter) Vi was the first Tongan to serve as a missionary among his own people. He and Taufa’ahau were traveling between islands in Ha’apai one day and Taufa’ahau was questioning Vi’s faith and the power of Vi’s god. Taufa’ahau was confounded by Vi’s utter commitment to his belief, so he issued a challenge to the Tongan Christian. Taufa’ahau pointed to a shark that was near the canoe. He took his spear and threw it not at the shark but into the water. He told Peter Vi that if his god was so powerful, Vi should not fear the shark and should fetch the spear. Vi not only accepted the challenge, but dove into the water,
missionary allies, imposed an annual tithe payable in coconut oil to the Wesleyan mission. Within a few years the Wesleyans insisted on being paid in cash, forcing men into cash cropping and creating financial indebtedness. George I also imposed a tax or “rent” on all adult men, also payable in coconut oil, but this time to the king, who, then, sold it and he kept the revenues and used them as he saw fit. By the 1880s the royal tax was also to be paid in cash (Gailey 1992).

Thus, in a matter of a few years Tongans had been dispossessed of their land, their kin-based social structure, their relative subsistence independence, and their traditional religious/spiritual belief system. Until this century the Tongan labor market was insignificant, because the Tongan state, the Wesleyan mission and the merchant houses were able to extract labor through penal servitude, debt bondage and labor service related to tenancy on the land. There were a few winners at the top and plenty of losers, none more so than Tongan women.

Christianity can be viewed as patriarchal and in conflict with pre-contact Tongan social structure. Tongan women, as the only producers of wealth (as opposed to subsistence products) were essentially autonomous from an economic standpoint. What is more, they held kin roles that were inherently authoritative over men, as a result of the fahu position in relationship to their brothers (James 1990, Rogers 1977). Chiefly women exercised secular and spiritual power and influence. This did not sit well with the missionaries, who used every connivance they could muster to subvert and reconstruct Tongan gender roles (Gailey 1987, 1992; Morton 1996).

found the spear and proceeded to swim around the canoe three times before returning aboard. Taufa’ahau was impressed. This may be an apocryphal story, but I heard it several times while in Tonga.
The church and the new Tongan state worked together to emphasize women as wives and to minimize their traditional authoritative position as sisters and paternal aunts. The nuclear family, as opposed to the extended kin group, became the idealized model of Tongan family life. Birthrates increased significantly, due to Christian promotion of the sexual availability of wives to husbands following the birth of children. Women were punished more severely than men were for violating the new Christian sexual taboos. It was in the interest of the new ruling class to support the suppression of *fahu* claims, because they were a threat to the newly established patrilineal primogeniture. Because of the shared interests of the church and the state in suppressing *fahu*, it was outlawed in the Tongan constitution (Gailey 1992).

Attempting to Europeanize Tonga, George I encouraged European dress. The 1875 Constitution, which was drafted by missionary advisors to the king, prohibited the production of wearing of *tapa*. Those who violated the prohibition were subject to heavy fines or hard labor on royal or state lands. It is likely not a coincidence that the missionaries were heavily invested in the European textile trade and benefited directly from the importation of European textiles at the expense of Tongan cloth. This was a direct assault upon the economic autonomy and power of women, who were the producers of *tapa* (Gailey 1992).

This did not sit well with the Tongan people, who resisted mightily, with 90% of them fined or sentenced to forced labor for violating the prohibition in 1877. The king backtracked, claiming that he was not responsible for the law and eventually it was rescinded. However, by that time European dress was considered prestigious. Furthermore, the missionaries made such dress mandatory for school and church.
As a result, what had previously been a mark of wealth, tapa cloth now became associated with the poor, who could not afford European dress. *Ngatu* continued to be used for ceremonial purposes, but not by government officials (until Queen Salote’s reign) (Gailey 1992).

The changes in Tongan society were rapid and pervasive, establishing class divisions and undermining traditional authority and autonomy of women. These changes were introduced by European merchants and missionaries, but they could not have taken hold except for the active collaboration of the chiefly elite. The foreign ideas of capitalism and Christianity would take hold, but would develop with a distinctly Tongan character. The contemporary Tongan political economy is a product of adoption and adaptation, of resistance and resilience.

**TONGAN POLITICAL ECONOMY & GENDER: TODAY**

Tonga consists of more than 170 islands in the southwest Pacific. Only 36 are inhabited, although others are used for agricultural or forestry production or as pasture for cattle (CIA 1998). The population is about 100,000, with more than 40% urbanized (and growing, while rural population decreases) (CIA 1998, Jansen 1982, OECD 1998, UNCTD 1997).

Migration from rural areas to Nuku’alofa continues for three reasons: (1) there is increased social status associated with urban living; (2) cash cropping in the rural areas has actually increased purchasing power that allows people to move to an urban area; and (3) increasing population pressure in rural areas leads to shortages of land (Clark 1980). The birthrate in Tonga is 26.43 births per 1000 population (CIA 1998), with women
averaging 4.0 births in their lifetimes and less than 60% of the women utilizing any form of birth control (OECD 1998). The population is very young with the median age at 18.1 years and a 6.8:1 ratio of people under 15 years of age to people over 60 years of age.

Tonga is part of the world economy and is classified as a “Lower Middle Income Country”, which was defined in 1995 as a nation with a per capita GNP ranging from $766 to $3035 per annum. The GNP per capita income was $1740 in 1995 (OECD 1998). Tonga imports significantly more than it exports, $69.1 million versus $13.7 million, respectively, in 1994 (UNTCD 1997). Last year (1998), Tonga’s 3rd quarter trade deficit alone was $19.2 million (National Reserve Bank of Tonga 1998). In 1985 foreign reserves could cover about 4 months of imports, but today that has fallen to 2.5 months (The Economist Intelligence Unit 1986, National Reserve Bank of Tonga 1998). The consumer price index rose 3.5% in the third quarter of 1998, with the major component of the increase being cost of food, which rose 15.8% from 1997 to 1998 (National Reserve Bank of Tonga 1998).

Tongan women continue to produce cloth, mats and basketry, but they do so on a smaller scale than in the past. *Tapa* (decorated *ngatu* or other kinds) is used only for ceremonial purposes, such as for exchange at weddings and funerals. Although this represents non-commodity wealth when used for ceremonies and kin exchanges, the traditional *koloa* has also been commodified for the tourist industry and there is a small market among the Tongan elite. In addition, Tongans who live abroad (primarily in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, also form a market. They must acquire the mats and *tapa* necessary for various transition ceremonies and they can only do so by
acquiring it from home. Foreign collectors also serve as another small market for cloth, mats and basketry (Gailey 1992).

As the need for cash has escalated, families and their kin have responded by developing strategies to generate cash. These include “cash cropping, craft production” (such as cloth, mats and basketry), “petty marketing, commercial fishing, wage labor and small businesses” (Gailey 1992:340). People who live in towns rely on their own or other family member’s bush api for subsistence items, but there is an increasing dependency on imported foodstuffs or locally produced staples such as bread⁸. Studies of dietary breadth suggest that children in Ha’apai and Vava’u have a more varied diet than those children living in Nuku’alofa. The absence of gardens in the urban area and greater dependency on cash for acquiring food may explain this difference (Jansen 1982).

The falekoloas stock a variety of New Zealand cookies, sweet biscuits, canned corned beef (and the generic “canned meat”), powdered milk, sugar, tea, instant coffee, peanut butter, jelly, and increasingly popular saimin noodles (chicken beef, pork, shrimp and curry flavors). They also sell the very popular (among Tongans) New Zealand “mutton flaps”, which are the fatty part of the rib cage of sheep⁹. Many of these falekoloas are begun by using remittance funds sent by Tongans working abroad to their families back home (Brown and Connell 1993, Gailey 1992).

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⁸ Two or three times a week bread would be produced at a small bakery in Pangai. People would line-up (ourselves included) to purchase the high gluten white (and occasionally whole wheat) bread. Cinnamon rolls were also produced and were very popular. I estimate that for the time I was in Ha’apai, the bulk of my morning and afternoon diet consisted of tea, peanut butter and bread, cinnamon rolls, cookies, and soda pop.

⁹ Carbohydrates (simple and complex) and fat comprise a large portion of the Tongan diet. The World Health Organization has designated Tonga as perhaps having the highest rate of diabetes mellitus (8%) of any nation in the South Pacific. Exercise is not a Tongan pastime and weight is considered a sign of strength. The traditional Tongan solution to “feeling weak” is to eat more, a dangerous prescription for a diabetic (Wright et al., 1994). An Australian medical aid worker in Nuku’alofa reported to me that the most
It has become increasingly difficult for non-elite Tongans to get access to land. Population has increased, but out-migration has relieved some of that pressure. The problem stems more from the control of all land by the king who allots it. Much land has been leased to religious groups for long-term use (Gailey 1992). Mormon churches and schools are springing up throughout Tonga, as the church expends its resources to establish itself in the islands.\(^{10}\) Mormon schools are increasingly popular because they are well funded. A Mormon school can be quickly identified by its cyclone fence and manicured grounds and basketball court (Wolf 1995).

In addition, the landed gentry are also engaged in cash cropping or larger scale export-driven agriculture. Leasing small plots to tenant subsistence farmers does not return the profit that can be obtained by withholding the land and leasing it to other wealthy Tongans or foreign investors (Gailey 1992). The land tenure system is increasingly exploitive, although most people continue to have access to subsistence, if not directly, then, via kin relationships. The land reforms of the constitution engendered (or facilitated a precontact trajectory towards) a landed gentry. Commodification of agricultural production (especially, copra production), also had the effect of transforming male agricultural work by elevating male social status as producers of (commodity) wealth (Morton 1996).

Gender differences today are important primarily within domestic and ceremonial relationships. On the other hand, gender is cited most often as the primary element of

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\(^{10}\) There is a clear competition among the three primary religious groups: the Wesleyans who have the largest numbers (30,000+), the Roman Catholics, and the Mormons. Children who attend the church schools (8% elementary and 90% of the secondary pupils) wear colors that specifically identify them as to their school and hence religious affiliation. In Pangai, the Wesleyans wore blue, the Catholics red, and the Mormons green.
social identity among Tongans. Religion and occupation, respectively, are next in importance, but there is a clear gender component to occupational categories. Duties of females are viewed as “light, easy, clean, and requiring little or no mobility” (Morton 1996:101), while male duties are described as “heavy, difficult, dirty, and requiring mobility” (Morton 1996:101).

Women, in general, and sisters in particular, symbolize chiefly virtues of “stasis, restraint, sanctity, superiority, dignity,” etc. (Morton 1996:101). Males are viewed as lacking restraint and being inferior. Females are central, males are peripheral. Adulthood is a female and chiefly condition, while childhood is associated with maleness and non-chiefliness. Queen Salote Tupou III, the mother of the current king, ruled from 1918 until her death in 1965. She represented the epitome of the Tongan ideal – chiefly, adult, and female.

Gender roles are defined early in a Tongan child’s life. Boys are handled more roughly than girls and are encouraged to roam. Girls stay near home. Public female child nudity is rare, but boys are allowed to play without clothing. This aversion to nudity (at least, female nudity) was introduced by the missionaries following contact. Attire is distinctly male or female, with little girls wearing dresses, stockings and ribbons in their hair. Boys wear either suits or shirts with the male wrap-around tupenu. By the time a child is a teenager, boys have considerable freedom to wander and their aggressiveness is viewed as normal. Wrestling and fighting are considered conventional rough play among males of any age. Smoking tobacco and drinking (often to excess) is associated with maleness or masculinity11. Adolescent girls, on the other hand, are subject to greater

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11 I observed few Tongan women smoking and, in Ha’apai, even fewer drinking. This is not to say that women do not smoke or drink, but males do so openly. Kava continues to be consumed. Most nights there
restrictions, but are also indulged in terms of material items. A girl’s inappropriate behavior is punished more strongly than a boy’s behavior. Young men and women on “dates” are chaperoned and virginity is a high ideal for unmarried women. Promiscuity is accepted as typical male behavior, with the Tongan equivalent of our “sowing wild oats” being to “hop from flower to flower.” Promiscuous women are denigrated and their chances for marriage are reduced (Morton 1996).

As I mentioned earlier, production of koloa continues and it remains part of the socialization process of women. The ngatu, mats and basketry are displayed at annual village meetings. Ngatu remains an important item of exchange at weddings, funerals and other transition ceremonies (Gailey 1992, Morton 1996).

Two weeks ago, the Queen officially opened the Women’s Training and Handicraft Centre in Ha’apai. There are 400 women from Ha’apai who belong to the Women-in-Development Association. The center will provide a weatherproof storage facility to hold tapa and other handicrafts produced by the women of Ha’apai. The center also includes a conference room, a workshop, an office, and a display and sales area. The U.S. Peace Corps is involved in the project and a volunteer is “devising a management and maintenance plan” for the center. The center will be used to offer training programs in home gardening, health and nutrition, appropriate technology, sanitation and income generation (The Tonga Chronicle 1999).

were kava circles that one could attend. Kava is prepared from the root a pepper plant, Piper methysticum, traditionally by pounding the root and having females masticate it and spit it into a bowl with water, where it would “cure”. Today, powdered kava is purchased in falekoloas or at markets and food cooperatives. It is mixed with water, strained and drunk. There is much social and ritual behavior associated with sharing kava. It looks like brown, muddy water and tastes about the same. It is a mild euphoric, but mostly it numbed my gums and teeth. It is also used for a variety of maladies as a diuretic, laxative, analgesic, antipyretic, etc. (Finau, et al., 1982). It is increasingly marketed in the United States as an over-the-counter pharmaceutical, as I have seen it for sale in health food stores in Palo Alto, marketed as a relief for anxiety and depression.
It is not that Tongan women have never known about gardening or health or nutrition or sanitation or production of wealth. What they will be “taught” is how to do those things within the contemporary political economic context – the world capitalist mode of production. Some may view Tonga today as a hybridization of seemingly traditional kin-based and capitalist class-based modes of production. However, the “traditional” patrilineal primogeniture that created a landed gentry that is permitted to deny access to land was a construct of the conjuncture of 18th and 19th Century European merchant capitalism with precontact emerging class distinctions and indigenous political infighting among the chiefly ranks of Tonga. Chiefs and their kindred who did not ally themselves with the missionaries and their chosen Tongan paramount chief, George Tupou I, were losers in the civil wars. The Tongan people, the tu’a commoners, and especially Tongan women, were losers in the formation of the Tongan state (monarchy) and the peace that followed the civil wars.

CONCLUSION

In the face of world capitalism, the Tongans have displayed a flexibility that has allowed them to survive at a subsistence level. They retain, at least domestically and ceremonially, the kin-based system that recognized the social authority of women and valued the wealth (koloa) that they produced with their own hands. The Tongans are not unique in this respect, as local people across the planet have responded in their own way to the advancing capitalist mode of production (Mintz 1977).

Tonga is in flux and the only certainty is change. More and more Tongans are exposed each year to Western (American) material lifestyles via television, movies and
their own or relatives’ stays in the United States, New Zealand or Australia. The “Los Angeles street gang attire” of baggy clothes and bandanas was prevalent on the streets of Nuku’alofa in 1995 (Wolf 1995). Oceanic “hip hop” or “rap” is the music of young Tongans who are confronted with rising material expectations and declining economic opportunities at home, as the Gross Domestic Product and foreign reserves continue to decline (Tonga Times 1999).

Remittances are increasingly important as the primary source of foreign exchange and vital to the establishment of petty capitalist family (or extended kin group) enterprises necessary to get by in the cash economy (Brown and Connell 1993, Gailey 1992). But alone, they will not be sufficient to meet the increasing demands for cash. With land a limited resource and increasingly controlled by a few and few options for the broad expansion of the wage economy, something will have to give way – either capitalism (not likely) or the Tongan way of life. There can be little doubt that current urbanization trends will increase and rural populations continue in decline. These changes will further impinge upon the remaining kin-based social authority of women. Scarce wage labor jobs, many in the construction trade (Candler 1997), will go to men, not women. As a result women will be further marginalized, Peace Corps efforts to commodify koloa production notwithstanding. I fear that the people of Tonga will be reduced to “raw materials for production” (Giri 1995:208), in order to survive in the global economy. How Tongan women (and men) respond to the challenge will be their history of the next century.
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