

Chapter 4.

CULTURE AND GENDER

A. Traditional Social Structure

A rigid stratification system lies at the heart of the traditional Tongan social order. Early social organization basically took the form of ruling monarchs from three chiefly lineages which in order of supremacy were the Tu'i Tonga, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua and Tu'i Kanokupolu. Chiefly families (*hau'eiki*) who formed a landed aristocracy with hereditary titles occupied the next level, followed by their spokesmen or 'talking chiefs' (*matapule*). At the bottom ranked the vast majority of Tongans who were commoners (*tu'a*) followed by the slaves. (Taufe'ulungaki 1991:6-7)

Land ownership was not vested in the community but in the monarch, although it was distributed for use by titled, hereditary male chiefs. In exchange, these chiefs offered labor, warriors and tribute (*inasi*) as a mark of their allegiance. The concept of chiefly rule presupposed a reciprocal relationship whereby chiefs gave leadership and protection in exchange for labor, allegiance, duty and obedience. Political groupings of titled chiefs (based on a sub-ranking system according to blood ties and marriage connections with the ruling dynasties) were known as *ha'a*.

Within each chiefly estate resided a chief's subjects or *kainga*, a kinship group related by blood or marital ties to him but which sometimes included non-relatives who claimed membership on the grounds of residence. *Kainga* were sub-divided into social units known as *fa'ahinga* whose blood relatives did not necessarily live together. The basic social unit was the extended family (*famili*) made up of the immediate family together with grandparents, uncles, aunts and unmarried cousins. (ibid.)

As Taufe'ulungaki explains (1991:7-8), the concept of rank – based on an inherited, immutable status commanding respect – is 'pivotal to an understanding of the Tongan socio-political structure'. The social rank of an individual was determined most importantly, but not exclusively, by kinship or blood ties. Seniority and gender were also key factors such that at all levels sisters outranked their brothers and older siblings outranked younger siblings of the same sex. The superior rank of women was attributed to their ancient mystical powers, which were passed on through successive generations from mother to daughter.

Together, these variables interacted with the principles of secular power and authority to create the highly complex power relations that underpinned the *kainga* and *famili* as well as the wider socio-political order. Bott has usefully described the *kainga* as embodying a system of hierarchical ranking based on the twin principles of patrilineal authority and ceremonial rank.

The special status accorded to sisters (which extended beyond mere respect to rights and privileges) represented a check against what might otherwise have been a more extreme male-dominant social order. A good example can be seen in the example of the Tu'i Tonga himself who represented the supreme political authority in Tonga but who was outranked both by his eldest sister, the Tu'i Tonga Fefine, and her eldest daughter.

Further down the hierarchy, this dichotomy was reproduced, for example within the *famili* where the authority figure of the father found himself outranked by his sisters, more especially by his eldest sister (*mehekitanga*) who held the highest rank within the family and enjoyed *fahu* status. The *fahu* has been described as having 'unlimited authority' over others within her kin group, including the right to demand goods and services from her brothers, mother's brothers (maternal uncles) and other kin over whom she had *fahu* status.

B. Traditional Status of Women and the Gender Division of Labor

Gender relations and the status of women cannot be understood in isolation from the wider social order for they are intimately connected. Above all, the strong mediating role played by social class (or traditional rank) makes it necessary to guard against making superficial generalizations about the position of women. The overarching importance of inherited rank has a significant influence on the status of women and it creates fundamentally different outcomes (viz. status, rights, economic-political power etc.) for women depending on 'where they sit' within the social system. This is illustrated most pointedly with respect to women of chiefly rank (*hau'eiki*) and women of non-chiefly or commoner rank (*tu'a*).

Knowledge about the traditional status of women prior to the impact of European and missionary contact is fairly fragmentary. There are also differences of opinion and interpretation. However, from the records of early (foreign) observers, it appears that women enjoyed a greater degree of individual freedom and chiefly women exercised a fair amount of economic and political power. Unlike other parts of the Pacific, women ate with men (rather than after them), drank *kava*, went to sea (on long voyages by canoe), participated in important religious ceremonies and boxing feats, and even sometimes went to war. (Ralston 1996: 110-112).

Engagement in productive labor was determined primarily by rank, and only secondarily by gender. Chiefly women did not undertake 'work' but more commonly played a supervisory role over the laboring of commoner women. Subsumed under this female hierarchy, a gender division of labor applied, delineating different jobs for men and women although with probably more flexibility than is generally acknowledged.

In particular, men are said to have borne the burden of hard physical agricultural labor (planting, hoeing and harvesting of crops), canoe making and house construction, and fishing. Commoner women, on the other hand, are said to have undertaken 'light' agricultural work (especially in their home gardens), spent long hours gleaning the reefs and collecting seafood from the inshore lagoons, and engaged in the craft of *tapa* making and mat weaving. Recent archaeological evidence (based on research in the Atele area of Tongatapu) suggests, however, that contrary to conventional wisdom commoner women almost certainly participated in heavy agricultural work (especially hoeing and weeding) and were even responsible for carrying heavy loads of produce home from the garden. (Spennemann 1996:101-103)

The durable craft products of women not only had an important utilitarian function (clothing, bedding, house furnishings etc.) for they also constituted wealth (*koloa fakatonga*) and as such played a critical (and legitimizing) role at key ceremonial occasions such as births, deaths and

marriages. Chiefly women played a prestigious (and quasi-political role) not only by supervising or managing the production process but also by controlling the distribution of this wealth.

Two aspects of the traditional division of labor contrast sharply with the division of household responsibilities today: and that is that neither childcare nor cooking were the primary responsibilities of women. While women were probably responsible for most child care-related responsibilities, men/boys also participated, both in their capacity as fathers and grandfathers, and as older brothers. This nurturing role of men was considered 'perfectly proper' and 'natural' and was reinforced by their responsibilities to provide food, protection and other support to their sisters and their sisters' children. Men undertook all the cooking with the exception of certain chiefly dishes, which were prepared by women. (Ralston 1996:112-113)

While political power was essentially a male prerogative, it would be wrong to see women as entirely marginalized from the political process; or as being unable to exercise political influence. Certain chiefly women (for example women from the chiefly Kanokupolu lineage) were, according to Ralston (1996:115), 'openly and personally involved in active political careers and in the political fortunes of their close kin' while others were able to extract tribute or generally exercise political and economic authority over commoners.

In other respects, the scope for women to exercise political power derived from their higher personal rank (whereby sisters outranked their brothers under the *fahu* system). Although they could not usually inherit land or formal chiefly titles, they were often able to exercise influence over important decisions and otherwise wield power discreetly or covertly. One concrete manifestation of this power was the ability of a sister to choose marriage partners for her brothers (and later their children). Given that marriage was not simply a commitment between two individuals but involved a much bigger (and more complex) union between families and kin, women were, through this practice alone, well placed to influence lineages, shape political alliances and determine political fortunes (or misfortunes).

This power was reinforced by a woman's position of superior rank as a mother since descent traced through the female line was 'as influential, if not more influential, than descent traced through men'. Thus, 'at all levels of chiefly society the rank of the mother was more important than that of the father in determining the rank and political fortunes of the next generation.' (op.cit:114)

The establishment of the Christian church and the cash economy had a marked impact on the social and political landscape of Tonga. Their effects on the status of women were both adverse and beneficial. On the one hand, the new era encouraged

Table 28: Tongan Population by Religious Affiliation, 1996

Religion	Total Membership	%
Free Wesleyan Church	39,703	41.30
Catholic	15,309	15.90
Latter Day Saints	13,225	13.70
Free Church of Tonga	11,226	11.60
Church of Tonga	7,016	7.30
Tokaikolo	2,919	3.00
Anglican	720	0.70
Seventh Day Adventist	2,381	2.40
Assembly of God	1,082	1.10
Tonga Konisitutone	845	0.80
Gospel Church	63	0.06
Bahai Faith	595	0.60
Moslem	35	0.03
Others	830	0.80
Refuse to answer	10	0.01
None	61	0.06
Total	96,020	100.00

Source: Government of Tonga, Census Report, 1996

the greater domestication of women, devalued their traditional *koloa*, gave primacy to their more subordinate status as wives, eroded their land rights and marginalized them from the 'modern' political process.

On the other hand, the right of a (chiefly) woman to succeed to the throne was institutionalized and the *fahu* system retained at least a measure of women's former mystical status and social and material privileges. More importantly, the gulf between the status of chiefly and non-chiefly women narrowed with the enshrined rights for commoners under the 1875 Constitution and through the erosion of chiefly (female) powers over the production and distribution of goods and services by their lower ranking 'sisters'.

C. Female Sexuality and Marriage

As with other aspects of women's status in Tonga, the controls on female sexuality were traditionally linked to the overarching social system, in particular the system of rank. In general, the sexuality of both men and women was perceived as something to be enjoyed and sexual activity was generally encouraged. Probably the greatest amount of sexual freedom was enjoyed by unmarried non-chiefly women and any women who were separated or widowed. These women were effectively free to make sexual liaisons of any duration. Controls were greater amongst young chiefly women and married women, both of whom experienced less freedom than their male counterparts. Unlike other parts of the Pacific, there appear to have been few, if any, controls (such as seclusion) relating to menstruation, pregnancy and early maternity. (Ralston 1996: 111-112)

Marriages were traditionally arranged and objections expressed through elopement rather than outright disagreement or refusal. They were also celebrated unions between whole families/kin groups rather than just two individuals. A flow of goods especially valuables or *koloa* in the form of fine mats and *tapa* gave legitimacy and endorsement to the union. Women represented an economic and political asset in marriage. However, the *fahu* system injected a unique dimension into the institution in Tonga.

However, the *fahu* system injected a unique dimension into the institution in Tonga. Most notably, it created an imbalance between the two 'marrying' families by elevating the status (privileges, rights and power) of the family into which a woman married. In essence, her *fahu* position (in relation to her brothers and her mother's brothers) entitled her to continue to receive goods and services even after marriage. Her children duly enjoyed this right as well. For this reason, the presentation of goods on marriage (mentioned above) was essentially from the bride's family to the bridegroom's family, with no expectation of reciprocity.

The advent of Christianity has probably been the single most important influence on accepted norms of female sexuality. Christianity institutionalized monogamous marriage and the related concept of legitimacy. It also imposed a stringent sexual code upon women and promoted the institution of the patriarchal family. Female sexuality was permitted legitimate expression only within marriage and any sexual activity outside the institution, whether before (premarital sex) or after (adultery) was deemed morally reprehensible. Moral transgressions tarnished a woman's reputation and brought strong social disapproval. As Chapter 2 Section H demonstrates, these social controls were subsequently reinforced by legal sanctions, which tied the mores of female sexuality to women's land rights.

Christian values continue to be the foundation of contemporary standards of sexual morality. Virginity, for example, is still theoretically a requirement for women on marriage although it is less likely to be put to the test (through rituals on the wedding night) than it was in the past. So too, Christian values give strength and legitimacy to the patriarchal family unit and in the process are helping to shift the balance between women's status as 'wives' and 'sisters' in favor of the former. Because of their subordinate status as wives, this means an overall diminution of women's status.

D. The Patriarchal Household and Early Socialization

In accordance with tradition, the power dynamics inherent in Tonga's socio-political system associate men with secular or temporal power. This is mirrored in the patriarchal family unit where they are the assumed and accepted heads of households and the father/husband is accorded respect as well as power and authority. Men's obligations to their sisters and their sisters' children (who outrank them) do not limit either their authority or their property rights in any substantive way.

The early socialization of children also reflects the authoritarian nature of Tongan society, and conformity to cultural norms is vigilantly nurtured within the patriarchal family. During early childhood, the values of respect (*faka'apa'apa*) and obedience (*talangofua*) are strongly encouraged. In particular, respect and obedience are taught with regard to parents, especially the father as head of the household. Questioning of parental (especially paternal) authority is not tolerated and deviant behavior (in the form of answering back, questioning or the lack of automatic compliance with instructions) can be severely punished. Children are also discouraged from participating in adult conversation, termed *kau'italanoa* (or butting in).

This social distance between parents and their children and the supporting regime of rules that govern children's behavior, attitudes and values, allows little opportunity for (two-way) communication between parents and children. It also discourages open criticism and independent thinking. This continues at school where induction into the values of respect, obedience, loyalty and duty are rigorously applied to the wider social order, in particular towards the King as the ultimate source and highest level of (secular) power and authority.

Both at home and at school, this broader process of socializing children into the norms of a rigidly stratified society is mediated in different ways. It happens more explicitly through teaching or formal instruction, and less obviously through ceremonial rituals, the myths of origin, and other oral traditions illustrating chiefly feats of conquest, wisdom and purity of lineage etc.

Within this general framework, gender is a subordinate, albeit significant, factor in the socialization process. Boys and girls are taught – by observation and participation – their expected roles within the division of labor. Typically, girls are taught household work, childcare and traditional craft skills like weaving, while boys are initiated into outdoor jobs like collecting firewood and coconuts, and light agricultural work. However, one of the more distinctive features of socialization in Tonga is that boys are taught to respect, protect and care for their sisters. These cultural rules are directly linked to the institution of the *fahu* which lays down the superior rank (viz. interests, rights and obligations) of a sister in relation to her brother .

The dynamics of family relations and gender socialization include an interesting paradox. While girls ostensibly enjoy higher status than boys (by 'outranking' them), they are subjected to tighter controls with regard to their social mobility, sexuality and overall independence.

Girls are expected to stay at home and to venture out only with parental permission. Outside school and church, they are given fewer opportunities for social intercourse, whether escorted or not. These restrictions are applied particularly with the onset of puberty and last until a young woman is married. As discussed in other sections, sexual purity (virginity) at marriage is still expected of women, although this is becoming increasingly difficult for parents to enforce.