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TRAVELLING GODS AND NASTY SPIRITS
Ancient Religious Representations and Missionization in Tonga (Polynesia)

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This paper seeks to contextualize, and understand better, the phenomenon of divine possession by ancient priests on the Tongan Islands in Western Polynesia. By means of an ethnographic reconstruction, I shall try to answer the question how the supernatural side of the ancient Tongan system of representations was organized. The main sources are the writings of early travellers, missionaries and anthropologists. At the end of the eighteenth century, the captain of the first missionary ship, James Wilson, published a book with summaries of the missionaries' journals and his own logbook (Wilson 1799). The sources also include an account by the young British sailor William Mariner, a survivor of the massacre by Tongans on his ship "Port-au-Prince" who was obliged to live in Tonga between 1806 and 1810 (see Martin 1981). I have also obtained access to the unpublished manuscripts of the early Wesleyan Methodist missionary John Thomas, who lived in Tonga between 1826 and 1859 (Thomas n.d.a, b). Thomas's manuscripts are part of the Methodist Missionary Archives, which are now held by the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

The God was in the Priest's Body

In ancient Tonga, a priest could be possessed by a god whom he recognized. Some gods used their priest in a gentle manner. During the act of possession, the priest might be in a sitting position with hands folded and eyes cast down. Then the chief or his attendant asked questions about warfare and other risky undertakings, sickness or natural disasters. The priest would answer in a low, strange tone, and always replied in the first person singular. On other occasions the incarnation was less peaceful. Then the priest might appear fearful, sweat pouring from his forehead, his body trembling, tears streaming from his eyes, his chest heaving, lips darkening and words coming out haltingly. The anthropologist Edward Gifford described the priest Kautae being possessed by the god Taufa'itahi: "Kautae shook all over when the god was in him. The movement of the body was an up-and-down trembling, arms flexed and shaking, head bowed slightly, eyes staring" (Gifford 1929:299). After the session the priest became quiet again, took a club and beat it on the ground or against a post, after which the god left immediately. All this took much energy out of the priest, who had a hearty appetite after the event. Once possessed, the priest was accorded respect because it was recog-

nized that the god was in the priest's body. The chiefs, including the paramount Tu'i Tonga, showed proper respect by, for example, sitting at a distance from the priest among the ordinary people. The advice and prophecies coming out of the mouth of the priest actually came from the god who was possessing him and using the priest as his mouthpiece.

Slightly earlier than Gifford, a missionary school teacher, E.E.V. Collocott, observed that "very few contemporary Tongans have witnessed the performance, but I have been fortunate enough to hear from a very intelligent elderly chief a graphic description of the inspiration of a priest which he witnessed in his boyhood" (Collocott 1921a:156). Collocott then gives a similar description to Gifford's, in which we may discern the same basic structure. A French navy captain, Jules Dumont d'Urville, published a drawing of a group of supplicants in front of the house of a possessed priest (1832: pl.77). Similar descriptions are known from other Western Polynesian societies. On the neighbouring island of Rotuma, for example, the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries considered the islanders to be 'devil worshippers'. The Rotumans had 'heathen' temples (*rimonu*) and priests (*apeoity*) who were consulted in times of disease or war. People took with them gifts of food, pigs and mats. After the gift had been offered, they remained in the temple in order to witness the priest trembling and shaking. The priest

> was then supposed to be under the influence of the devil. The visitors were filled with fear, and waited anxious to hear what the devil had to say through the mouth of the priest. The priest said generally something to please the visitors, after which the priest and visitors drank *kava* together, and then separated (Allen 1895:578).

Victor Turner's model of social drama could be applied to this small-scale ritual context (1974, 1985, 1987). Originally, Turner's concept of social drama was an elaboration of van Gennep's (1909) phase of liminality, the middle phase of the latter's notion of the *rites de passage*. Turner subdivided and operationalized this liminal phase methodologically into four phases of observable public action: (1) breach, (2) mounting crisis, (3) redressive action, and (4) either (a) reintegration or (b) recognition or legitimation. The breach (first phase) concerns regular, norm-governed social relations in, for example, a village, a chiefdom, an office or a church. It represents a public breach or the non-fulfilment of norms, and as such is an obvious symbol of dissidence. The act of possession by a god may be interpreted as a breach with the daily life of the normal social world. The second phase, of mounting crisis, often shows a tendency of the breach to widen, a tendency towards escalation. The fearful appearance of the priest during his trance may be interpreted as manifesting a widening breach with the normal world. In order to limit the spread of the crisis, leading members of the disturbed social system engage in the third phase, that of redressive action. This may range from personal advice and informal mediation or arbitration to formal juridical and legal action and public ritual or even war. In the case of a possession by a god, this

phase of mediation may be represented by beating a stick on the ground, after which the god leaves the priest's body. Phase four is a temporary climax, solution or outcome, either in the form of the reintegration of the disturbed social group, or of the recognition or legitimation of an irreparable schism between the contesting parties. The reintegration phase in the ritual may be represented by the hearty appetite of the priest after coming out of possession and his eating or, in the Rotuman case, *kava* drinking.

Often, in religious representations the logical order between the human world and the supernatural world tends to be semiologically inverted: the relationships between humans are deduced from relationships among the gods on the one hand and between gods and humans on the other, for example in terms of descent. In ancient Tonga too, the ramage system and its accompanying social inequality were legitimised by referring to the divine descent of the sacred paramount chief, the Tu'i Tonga. Through his descent from the god Tangaloa (i.e. from the first of the four gods with this name), the Tu'i Tonga serves as a model for the whole of Tongan society. As in most religions, the relationship b e t w e e n the Tongan people a n d the supernatural, as well as relationships w i t h i n the supernatural, reflect relationships between Tongans. Such mirrors, as Turner wrote, "are not mechanical, but consist of reflecting consciousnesses and the products of such consciousnesses formed into vocabularies and rules, into metalinguistic grammars, by means of which new unprecedented performances may be generated" (Turner 1987:22). This, in my view, is a subtler point of view than Durkheim's, for whom, ultimately, humans have never worshipped anything other than their own society (Durkheim 1912). Nor do I agree with Radcliffe-Brown and other (structural-) functionalists, who reduce religious representations and actions to a matter of social integration and cohesion. Nor should one reduce religious affairs psychologically to neurotic symptoms or defence mechanisms. Religious symbols and symbolic action, as Turner rightly emphasized (1974:57), are not epiphenomena of society or simple reflections but – to develop the mirror metaphor in my own words – transformations of existing social relations via a multitude of concave and convex mirrors, a matter not of d a t a but of r e l a t a (for example, human beings : gods :: commoners : chiefs :: children : parents).[1] Turner even speaks of a "hall of mirrors", that is "magic mirrors, each interpreting as well as reflecting the images beamed to it, and flashed down one to the others" (Turner 1987:24). This may be seen as another illustration of the dictum that "man does not live by bread alone, [but] is 'turned on' by legend, literature and art" (Turner 1974:165), in other words, by systems of representations. This will be further illustrated and analysed in the next section by answering the question, Who were these gods?

1 Stephanie Lawson proposed another appropriate metaphor to describe the relationship between Tongan politics and religion: "Tonga's polytheistic religious belief system naturally complemented the socio-political hierarchy – indeed they comprised the two sides of the same coin" (Lawson 1996:86).

Original Gods, Soul Gods, and Nasty Spirits

The ancient Tongans, with their "fairly elaborate theogony" (Collocott 1921a:152), supposed that the following elements of the universe already existed before the gods: the sea (Tahi), the sky (Langi), the underworld (Lolofonua) and the Tongan paradise (Pulotu). The first generation of gods arrived in Pulotu by sea. They were Limu and Kele, a kind of alga and silt respectively, representing the sea and the earth as well as a male and a female element (see diagram, nrs. 1, 2). They gave birth to Touiafutuna, a volcanic or ferriferous stone (nr. 3), which shook, grumbled and split four times, giving birth to four pairs of twins (nrs. 4–11). Three of these couples had carnal knowledge, the first giving birth to a son and a daughter, the second and third to a daughter each (nrs. 12–15). The son united with his sister to give birth to Hikuleo, probably a bisexual god (nr. 16). The son also united with his two cousins to give birth to four Tangaloa (nrs. 17, 19–21) and three Maui (nrs. 22–24) respectively. The eldest Tangaloa, 'Eutumatupu'a, was the father of the first (human) paramount chief Tu'i Tonga. In the Tongan pantheon, the four Tangaloa, their three brothers named Maui (nrs. 22–24) and their eldest, bisexual sibling Hikuleo (nr. 16) were the fifth generation of deities.[2] Of importance here is the fact that both the supernatural force or *mana* and the power to impose prohibitions or *tapu* (taboos) were transmitted via this genealogy to the first paramount chief or Tu'i Tonga (nr. 25) and his direct descendants. Another crucial aspect is the repeated divine intercourse between brothers and sisters (or between a man and his female cousins), which is the complete opposite of the brother sister avoidance relationship in the everyday life of humans (see van der Grijp 1993a, 2001) and which, via this mythological inversion, both explains and accentuates the importance of the brother sister relationship in Tonga.

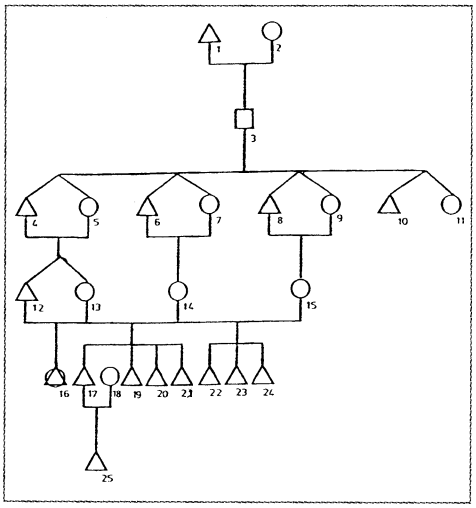

Diagram : The Tongan Pantheon

2 See Reiter (1907), Collocott (1921a:152–154), Gifford (1924:25–43) and Bott (1982:89–91). The Wesleyan Methodist missionary John Thomas is my primary source for the names of the Tangaloa, of whom he only knew three: (1) Tangaloa Biki, or Lord Tangaloa, (2) Tangaloa Tufunga, or The Artificer, and (3) Tangaloa Atulongolongo, or Silent Shade. These three were "all gods of the sky, acknowledged as such and, except by one family (to be noticed), not worshipped" (Thomas n.d.a:10). Thomas also was the first source of the names of the three Maui: (1) Mau'iloa, or Ancient Maui, (2) Mau'i Buku, or Short Maui, and (3) Maui'atalanga, or To Raise a Shade (Thomas n.a.1:10).

However, in ancient Tonga there were many more types of supernatural beings, which we may distinguish as "original gods", "soul gods" and "goblins" respectively. There were about 300 original gods (*'otua*), but at any one time only some of these were actually known. Synonyms of *'otua* were *fili, polua* and *taulamua*. A general designation for gods, spirits, ghosts and possessed priests was *fa'ahikehe*. Literally, this means "different kind" or "other side", which, according to Gifford, refers to powers different from those of ordinary mortals (Gifford 1929:289). Most of the original gods lived an eternal life in Pulotu, a kind of paradise situated somewhere to the west of the Tongan Islands which in principle could be reached by sea. Pulotu was identified with Lolofonua, the underworld. Two entrances were known: a deep hole on the island of Koloa in the Vava'u Group, and the volcano of Tofua on Ha'apai (see map). The god or culture hero Maui Kisikisi had brought fire from the underworld to the human world via the hole on Koloa, while on Tofua one could hear crying or singing from the volcano (Gifford 1929:287).[3] The god Maui did not live in Pulotu, and as such he was an exception.[4] This god had his huge body stretched out across the earth and thus supported the Tongan islands. When he tossed in his sleep, the islands shook. When the earthquakes were devastating, the Tongans shouted at Maui and struck the ground with sticks in order to wake him up and calm him down.[5] Maui, as I have said, was actually not one character, but three. According to Thomas, the Maui were gods from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, and "they were not worshipped" (Thomas n.d.a:10). According to one of Gifford's informants the Maui were more a kind of male culture hero than real gods (Gifford 1929:290). Elsewhere in Polynesia Maui was conceived as a half god (Westervelt 1910).

Throughout Tonga the same polytheism existed, but the specific gods and their attributes differed slightly from one group of islands to another. On Tongatapu, the main island in the south, for example, Hikuleo was the most important god of Pulotu, whereas in the central and northern archipelagos of Ha'apai and Vava'u, this was Aloalo, the god of wind, rain and agriculture. Here, Hikuleo was considered to be merely an important deity, connected especially with the sacred paramount chief Tu'i Tonga. Thomas associated Hikuleo with the Tu'i Tonga (n.d.a:10). Sarah Farmer repeated this view with the argument that Hikuleo was the special god of the Tu'i Tonga because the annual first fruit offering ceremony (*'inasi*) was devoted to Hikuleo (Farmer 1855:129, 132). There is also uncertainty about the sexual identity of Hikuleo. A. Caillot (1914:243) and some of Gifford's informants considered this god to be male,

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3 Gifford refers to a story about a man who searched for his deceased wife in Pulotu, found her and brought her back home (1929:183). Usually, however, Pulotu was considered to be inaccessible by human beings (Gifford 1924:153–180; see also Douaire-Marsaudon 1992).

4 In Tonga Maui was said to have pulled up the islands of Ata, Tongatapu, Ha'apai and Vava'u with a fishhook one after the other (Lawry 1850:113). But according to Mariner (in Martin 1981) it was Tangaloa who pulled up the island of Hunga with a fishhook, and with it the entire Vava'u group.

5 See Wilson (1799:277–278), Vason (1840:152–153), and Martin (1981:305).

Map : The Tonga Islands

others female. For example, for Kerry James, in her rejoinder to Valerio Valeri (1989), is was clear that Hikuleo was female (James 1991:265). Collocott (1921a:152) and Gifford (1929:291) suggested that Hikuleo might have been bisexual, a suggestion which has been further elaborated by Françoise Douaire-Marsaudon (1998:272–275). As a bisexual being, indeed, Hikuleo was both FeB and FeZ to the first Tu'i Tonga and therefore his *mehekitanga* (see also Rogers 1977, Douaire-Marsaudon 1996). In Ha'apai and Vava'u, Tangaloa was the god revered by craftsmen, whereas on Tongatapu he was honoured as the paramount god of Pulotu (Thomas n.d.a: 11–18). Tangaloa and Maui were also known in other parts of Polynesia, but their functions were different.[6] Elsewhere in Polynesia, Tangaloa, for example, was a sea god. Other pan-Polynesian gods such as Tu, Tane and Lono, were absent from Tonga.

The second category of supernatural beings in Pulotu were the souls (*laumalie*) of deceased chiefs (*hou 'eiki*) who became gods, the soul gods.[7] Like the original gods, these soul gods had a convenient eternal existence. In Pulotu was Vaiola, the source of life in the form of a spring or stream. (Deceased) sick persons washing themselves in Vaiola recovered their health, old people their youth, and blind persons and deaf mutes were able to see, hear and speak again.[8] The soul gods maintained the same rank, name and body form as during their previous existences. They were better able to distinguish between good and evil, truth and falsehood, than during their earthly lives. They had the same powers as the original gods, but everything to a slightly less-

6 In Polynesia, Tangaloa was a widely known deity with similar names such as Takaroa, Tanaoa and Kanaloa in Tahiti, the Marquesas and Hawaii respectively (see, for example, Tregear 1891:463–464).

7 Thomas mentioned nine gods of the Tu'i Tonga family: (1) Hikuleo, (2) Tuibulotufekai, (3) Bikitubu, (4) Laufilitonga, (5) Tuihihifo, (6) Fatafehi'olovaha, (7) Finaitakala, (8) Finautauiku and (9) "a goddess named Ngo áá, who was the fahu, or intercessor" (Thomas n.d.a:10). In order to distinguish them from the "Gods of Pulotu" Thomas called them the "Gods of This World", which refers to their origin (Thomas n.d.a:10). This, however, is confusing, since the "Gods of This World" also live in Pulotu.

8 Today, the main hospital in Tonga is named "Vaiola".

er degree, for example being a source of inspiration for the priests, advising them and making prophecies, and generally manifesting themselves to the living through visions and dreams. They were also able to cause diseases, for which they could be punished by the living, who would desecrate the grave of a deceased person, remove the bones and curse him. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, in spite of overall Christianisation, these ideas were still current. According to one witness:

> The superstition current in the Tonga Group is, that the disembodied spirit of the dead, no matter how amiable in life, is always apt to return to earth, and there bites the throats of his former friends in their sleep. This leaves no mark, or at the most but a slight redness, but the person bitten dies soon afterwards.[9]

For fear of being contaminated by death-causing diseases, the living kept clear of the graves at night. Deceased chiefs' attendants (*matapule*) also became soul gods. In Pulotu, they served the gods, as they had done during their previous life with the chiefs. *Matapule* soul gods manifested themselves from time to time to living kinsfolk and friends. Some *matapule* soul gods functioned as tutelary deities for the common people (*tu'a*), and in so doing continued to fulfil their role as mediators between the people and their chiefs. According to Edwin Ferdon (1987:75), each living Tongan was believed to have a personal guardian deity. In this way, the increasing number of soul gods caused by the deaths of chiefs and their *matapule* would satisfy an ever-increasing need. Gifford, however, stated that every lineage had its own tutelary deity (1929:318–319), which is not the same as "each living Tongan" (Ferdon) and would seem to be more logical. This not only applied to lineages that had a real chief (*'eiki*), but also to lineages headed by a chief's attendant. In some cases it also applied to commoner lineages. Only members of the aristocracy (i.e. chiefs, their attendants and close kin) went to Pulotu. As Mariner emphasized, this was not "according to their moral merit, but their rank in this world" (Martin 1981:298). For the common people such an afterlife did not exist. The souls (*mou*) of commoners appeared shortly after the funeral, mainly in the form of an insect, usually a fly, on a mat or *tapa*, which had been exposed in front of the house of the deceased for that purpose.[10] An early witness to the fact that the Tongans – literally – would not harm a fly stated:

> [...] *zij dooden oock geene vliegen (die hier in grooten overvloet sijn ende hun genoch quellen) hoe veel die Zelve haer op 't lichaem Zitten, 't is gebeurt ter wijle wij hier lagen, dat onzen stuerman (bij geval) een vliech ende die in 't aenzien, van een dezer oppersten doodden, waer over hem dezen man gram 't hoonden* (Tasman 1919:75–76).

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9 Mahony (1915:168). It should be noted that B.G. Mahony wrote this at the beginning of the twentieth century, and is thus a relatively recent witness in these matters.

10 See, for example, Malaspina (1793) in Herda (1983:135), Martin (1981:298), Vason (1840:151–152), and Gifford (1929:328).

> [...] they did not kill flies (which are here in large numbers and annoying enough), whatever number is sitting on their bodies. When we were here, it happened that our mate killed a fly in front of a paramount chief; the chief became furious.[11]

The third category of supernatural beings was of small, malignant ghosts or goblins. Sometimes, these goblins were rated among the gods, sometimes they were not. They had no proper names, no priests, and were never called upon. Actually, they were nasty spirits, the source of all sorts of mischief such as indicating the wrong direction to voyagers, pinching and biting, falling on the back of people when they were asleep and causing nightmares. This was not a punishment, but purely harassment.[12]

Ancient Tongan Priests and European Missionaries

Early European viewpoints, such as Abel Tasman's about the absence of Tongan religion (1919:75), had already been modified by William Mariner at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Martin 1981:76, 83–85). At the time of the London Missionary Society, what attracted the attention of the Tongans the most about the new white men was a curious object they brought with them: a cuckoo clock. In this 'speaking wood' lived a spirit who manifested itself regularly: the 'bird spirit'. Their perception of the strange object was no accident. In the village of Mu'a were several houses in which, according to the Tongans, spirits lived. So far as the missionaries could discover, these spirits took the form of whale's teeth, stones, and blocks of wood, carved or uncarved, and wrapped in pieces of *tapa* cloth. According to the missionaries' informants, they came originally from Fiji, from where they had been taken by Tongans keen on travelling. The houses of the spirits were in a ramshackle state, but were sacred to such an extent that it was not permitted either to touch or repair them (Wilson 1799:252). Other observers wrote about such spirit houses in terms of god houses. These had the appearance of ordinary houses, but were of a slightly superior construction. Valuable objects such as lengths of *tapa*, whale's teeth, and anthropomorphous woodcarvings were buried under the foundations of god houses,[13] and weapons painted with turmeric (a red substance made from the roots of the Curcuma longa) placed inside them. Some of these objects were human in form but, according to Gifford, "there is no evi-

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11 In 1988 and 1989, during my first fieldwork on Wallis (Uvea), an island which was colonized and dominated by Tongans during the Tu'i Tonga empire centuries ago (see Mahina 1992), I was informed by several people that it was taboo (*tapu*) to kill flies. This taboo did not exist for mosquitoes, nor for other insects.

12 Martin (1981:298). See also Collocott (1921b, 1923), Helu (1985) and Gordon (1995).

13 See Malaspina (1793) in Herda (1983:83–85, 134), Martin (1981:301) and Dumont d'Urville (1832: pl.101).

dence that they were regarded as idols" (1929:318). In the case of the London Missionary Society's clock at the end of the eighteenth century, however, the Tongans thought that they were not allowed to touch the clock. They believed that if they were to steal anything from the missionaries, the bird spirit would discover them immediately, which, according to the missionaries, "was not without its use" (Wilson 1799: 231). Sometimes, the high chief Tuku'aho asked about the clock, but also let it be known that he would not like to have such a spirit in his own house. Fatafehi, on the other hand, wanted to have one. He was not afraid, since as a Tu'i Tonga or sacred paramount chief he was descended from a god. The missionaries, who had more than one clock, were willing to grant his request. Once he got it home, Fatafehi dismantled the clock, and was then unable to reassemble it. The missionaries whose help he sought were also unable to do so, greatly to the amusement of the Tongans.[14]

The Wesleyan Methodist missionary John Thomas, who lived in Tonga between 1826 and 1859, was also aware of the false image previously published of the indigenous religion by, as he called them, "persons who had not the means of obtaining correct information" (Thomas n.d.a:46). Thomas's unpublished manuscripts are still among the most important sources on the ancient Tongan religion. In the beginning, however, Thomas was not acquainted with the religious experiences of the Tongans. In 1827, for example, he repeatedly told the visiting French naval captain Dumont d'Urville that the Tongan people do not worship any wooden or stone idols.[15] The wooden, humanlike objects were not regarded as gods, according to Thomas

> No images were set up by the Tongans, to be looked upon, and worshipped, and the rude wooden images which were formerly found in various parts of the land, called Tamabua, were Tonga memento's of some dear friends, like our pictures, a few persons might occasionally have used them as objects of the religious worship, but they would be the exception (Thomas n.d.a:56).

In 1834, however, Thomas obtained four pieces of wood which were worshipped by the population. The missionary described the objects as "[*gods*] made somewhat in the likeness of human beings and chiefly of the female sex, they have a very old fashioned appearance" (Thomas 1830). He assumed that they were made at a time when iron tools were still scarce, i.e. at the beginning of the contact period (see van der Grijp 1994).

Thomas and other early missionaries used to speak of the Tongans as 'heathens' who had to be converted. This leads us once more to the question, What was Tongan 'heathenism' or ancient religion all about?

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14 See van der Grijp (n.d.). According to the missionary George Vason, this incident "encouraged [the Tongans'] vanity; and now, they prided themselves in the idea, that they were as skilful and clever as we" (Vason 1840:108).

15 As quoted by the latter, the Tongan people "n'adore aucune effigie matérielle en bois ou en pierre" (Dumont d'Urville 1832:83).

The original gods were spirits without form who were able to incarnate themselves in living beings such as lizards, geckos, sea snakes, turtles, sharks, porpoises (i.e. a kind of whale) and human beings. These animals and human beings were the special boats (*vaka*) in which the gods transferred themselves from the divine underworld (Pulotu) to the world of the people. The gods could communicate their ideas through the medium of visions, dreams or possessed priests. The deity Taufa'itahi, for example, might appear as a shark, a gecko, or in the body of the priest Kautae; the deity Fehulani could disguise itself as a man or a woman; and the goddesses Sisi and Faingea had the choice between appearing as herons or as women. The Wesleyan Methodist missionary Walter Lawry stated that "most of the departed spirits retire into human beings, but some of them go into rats, or rather field mice, lizards, birds, etc." (cited in WMMS 1823:29). In the seventeenth century, Tasman observed how a Tongan fished out of the water a sea snake which swam in front of his canoe, put it respectfully on his head and returned it to the sea.[16] Gods were considered to be more intelligent than humans, with the ability to read human thoughts and influence behaviour (Martin 1981:301–305, 312). The original gods rewarded or punished good or bad behaviour immediately, during the lives of mortals, and not in the (eventual) hereafter. People could not meddle with values such as showing respect (*faka'apa'apa*) towards gods, chiefs and the elderly, who were all gifted with *mana* and surrounded by taboos. Love for one's parents and children was an absolute necessity, as was the observance of religious rules and, generally, humility and modesty. Other values were of a more flexible character and might be interpreted differently, such as defence of one's own inheritance rights, patriotism, honour and justice. Anyone who violated these values, however, could be certain of divine retribution. This varied from disease, conspiracy and famine to even causing the death of the person concerned. Commoners were also punished for their neglect of their chief's religious duties. Angry gods could be reconciled. The appropriate way to do this was to consult a priest who was possessed by the god (Martin 1981:298–300, 317).

Contested Priesthood

According to the missionaries of the London Missionary Society at the end of the eighteenth century, the Tongans did not have priests: "We have seen no person among them that seems more religious than another, or any thing that could lead us to suppose there is any such character as a priest among them" (Wilson 1799:277). There was, however, certainly a social category defined as priests. The animals and human

16 "[...] leijde hem eerbiedelijck op Zijn hooft ende zetten dien doen weder in 't water" (Tasman 1919:40).

beings in which the gods travelled from the divine underworld (Pulotu) to the human world were their *vaka* or boats, and the priests were called *taula 'otua*, or "anchors of the gods" (Martin 1981:299; Farmer 1855:132). These priests, who were usually appointed by local chiefs, were mainly middle-aged men or women, sometimes young persons, but never children. The priesthood was passed down from father to son or from mother to daughter. For example, the priesthood of Kautae, the priest of Taufa'itahi, was inherited from FF to FFB, to FFBS, to F, to *ego*. A new priest was always appointed when the former one died. The ego in this example was an informant of Gifford who was more than 80 years old. In 1921 he was a Roman Catholic, about whom Gifford said that he "never felt as though the god were going to enter him [...] [he] of course, does not exercise his priestly functions as did his predecessors" (Gifford 1929:299–300). This is a clear example of an ethnographic reconstruction.

Each Tongan lineage had its own priest, who administered the sacred objects of its god. These objects (*fakafa'anga*) consisted of fine mats among other things.[17] A folded mat was always kept ready for the god and was unfolded at his request so that he could rest. Children worshipped the god of their father, a wive that of her husband. Each priest served only one god. A god might be embodied in another person. In such cases the latter would report this to the Tu'i Tonga, who would appoint this person as a priest. When the priests were not possessed by a god, they behaved like as other people of their rank and were treated as such. Undoubtedly they came from the ranks of the chief's attendants, and some may have been lesser chiefs. They did not wear special clothing. The most elevated chiefs never became priests. Unlike what was reported by earlier authors, according to Gifford the Tu'i Tonga was not a priest (1929:317). This was confirmed by Laufilitonga's sister's daughter. Laufilitonga, who died in 1865, had been the last Tu'i Tonga. Although the sacred paramount chief Tu'i Tonga and his sister's eldest daughter, the Tamaha who was superior to him in rank, were both direct descendants of a god, they were both regarded as human beings. Religious rank within the hierarchy of priests in Tonga depended on the position of the respective god within the pantheon. Not all gods in Pulotu had their own priest, even if they had one or more god houses.[18]

The appropriate place to make an appeal to a soul god was at the graveside of the deceased person. These graves (*faitoka*) were thus as sacred as the god houses of the original gods. According to Ferdon, basing his view on data presented by Mariner, during the civil wars at the end of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century, when visiting the graves became too dangerous, people started to construct god houses within the fortresses (Ferdon 1987:74). The Tongans, Thomas observed, "paid the most profound respect to the burying places of their forefathers, the great chiefs of

17 Clerk Churchward ascribed to *fakafa'anga* the meaning of a "half-witted person" who functioned as a priest (1959:31).

18 The Maui and Tangaloa, for example, had neither priests nor god houses.

the land" (n.d.b:30). The reason for this respect was that Tongans saw everything that happened to them as coming from the gods. If, for example

> a chief was taken ill, say the King, the first thing to be attended to would be to send some of his friends to the burying place and have it weeded and cleaned, and if necessary new seeded round, and the house new thatched, for if more things have not been attended to, it would be considered there was a just cause for affliction, the spirits of his departed relatives being displeased (Thomas n.d.b:25).

The archaeologist Peter Bellwood thought that there were no open-air temple structures in Tonga (1979:316). His colleague Ferdon has contested this view as "not quite correct" (1987:77). The graves of the chiefs, in particular the Tu'i Tonga's graves (*langi*), were appropriate places to make an appeal to the gods. These *langi* thus functioned as religious structures in the open air (Ferdon 1987:77). Besides, certain plots of land, fenced off for this purpose, were dedicated to one or more gods (Vason 1840: 176–177). The most important task of the priests was to act as advisers and prophets. In times of war, the chiefs consulted the priests continuously. Success in warfare implied a successful alliance with the gods. When consulting the god through the priest, the chief brought with him a gift of *kava*, sometimes also a baked pig, and always spoke via his *matapule*. Mainly, however, the priests were not paid for their services, i.e. the participants did not conceive of any exchange as payment. During the annual first fruit offerings to the Tu'i Tonga, a quarter of all the food was destined for the gods and handed over to the priests.[19] The priests had no leading role in this ritual but had, as Thomas expressed it, "the charge of carrying the offerings" (n.d.b:19). In everyday life the priests supported themselves in the same way as all the other *matapule* and lower chiefs.

Like Samoans, Tongans did not pray to the gods, but sometimes they threw some *kava* on the ground or into the sea. For example, if anyone was attacked by a man-eating white shark (*tenifa*), it was assumed that the god Taufa'itahi was angry, and therefore *kava* was thrown into the sea to calm him down. Priests and others knew many stories about the gods, which were called *talatupu'a*.[20] Finally, it should be noted that the Tongan priests were the indigenous counterparts of the first European missionaries in that they were a social category, not a separate class of sacred persons. Every priest worked for him- or herself, independently of colleagues. According to Gifford this explains the absence of any organized resistance to the coming of Christianity (1929:317). However, although the missionaries of the London Missionary Society who were in Tonga at the very end of the eighteenth century were not aware of the existence

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19 Martin (1981:85–86, 108, 205, 290, 317), Urbanowicz (1972:78–86).

20 The word "tala" translates as "story" and "tupu'i" as "original gods" (in contrast to soul gods). A kindred term, "talanoa", refers to stories about the past which do not necessarily concern the gods (see Gifford 1924).

of indigenous priests at first, the priests themselves were afraid that the new religion would gain influence and that their own priesthood would be abolished, "with all the power, honour and privileges its members had enjoyed for centuries" (Latukefu 1977:117). This fear was not without foundation. Even before the arrival of the London Missionary Society in 1799, and certainly after the arrival of the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries in the 1820s, the ancient Tongan system of religious representations was already changing, probably as a result of the confrontation with previous foreign (European and other) worldviews and, perhaps even more importantly, the accelerated transition of their own politico-economic order before and during the civil war.

Revealing in this respect are the alleged proofs of the existence of the European god, which played a role in the conversion of the powerful chief Taufa'ahau, who was to become the first king of Tonga. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, however, Taufa'ahau was so disappointed by the refusal of the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries to accompany him, and by fobbing him off with Pita Vi, a commoner, as a teacher, that he left without the latter. On his return home, however, Taufa'ahau's boat was caught in a heavy storm. Assuming this to be a sign of the displeasure of the European god, he returned to pick up Pita Vi who then gave him instructions. Some weeks later, Taufa'ahau tested the power of the European god by bashing in the brains of an old priestess of the shark god Ha'eha'etahi with a war club. According to Pita Vi, who witnessed the event:

> The old priestess became inspired by Ha'eha'etahi, and in the meanwhile, Taufa'ahau had prepared a great drinking-cup [...]. The cup was then filled and handed by Taufa'ahau to the priestess; but, while her face was turned upwards, in the act of drinking off its contents, Taufa'ahau struck her a great blow on the forehead, which sent the god [or priestess] rolling on the ground. He then gave her another blow, and, raising a shout of victory, cried out that the god was slain (cited in West 1865:364).

Taufa'ahau tested the power of the new god in other ways too. For example, he collected and burned several sacred objects of the Tongan gods such as a large canoe. Next he dived into the ocean and taunted Ha'eha'etahi, Taufa'itahi, Taufa'ahau's own tutelary deity, and other Tongan gods to punish him, which they refrained from doing (Gifford 1929:298, 320). He also threw a spear from his boat towards a shark swimming by, assuming that it was Ha'eha'itahi. Having missed the shark, he then pushed Pita Vi and another passenger overboard to fetch the spear. They had to swim to the island of Ha'ano in order to get ashore. That they succeeded in doing this in spite of the presence of the shark strengthened Taufa'ahau in his belief in the new religion. When having endured numerous sacrilegious acts, including the cold-blooded murder of the old priestess, the Tongan gods failed to manifest their powers further, Taufa'ahau took this as conclusive proof of the omnipotence of the new god and had himself baptized. Later, armed with similar evidence of the existence of the European god,

he tried to persuade others to change to the new religion. In 1837, for example, he urged the inhabitants of the fortress of Pea, which he had just conquered, to renounce their 'heathen' religion. Their gods, he argued, had proved powerless:

> Your idols are only so many names. They cannot do anything. If they could, why do they not punish us for burning down their houses? No marks of displeasure have yet reached us. You see, we are in health, and are surrounded with many comforts and blessings (Taufa'ahau cited in Tucker 1837).

Not many years later, the Wesleyan Methodist missionaries were able to convert the last 'heathen' Tongans to their Methodist variant of Christianity (van der Grijp 1993b, c). After this, divine possession became a socially marginal phenomenon.

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