Field Notes on the Culture of Vaitupu, Ellice Islands

By
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INTRODUCTORY.

One of the characteristics of the people of Tuvalu (the Ellice Islands) is a tendency to depart from scenes of trouble and personal shame. Even at the present day, a man who is not bound by the close ties of family and of property will sometimes take a canoe and a few coconuts and trust himself to the mercy of the ocean rather than endure the reproach of his fellows. In the uncertain currents of the atoll groups this is virtual suicide; and although it is tempered by an element of chance, the primary intention of the one who thus sets out is to sever himself from all past connections even by death. Often, one or more sympathetic companions will accompany him, and their intention in thus wilfully sacrificing themselves is to bring repentance upon the persons responsible for their friend's grievance. In many cases, the departure of young folks is deliberately undertaken in order to punish older relatives for some real or fancied misuse of their authority.

Traditions show that this trait was not uncommon throughout Polynesia, and I would stress the very child-like mental attitude which underlies it, because I think it may have been the primary cause of many of the Polynesian settlements on isolated and unattractive islands, and also
because it offers an explanation of the apparently insufficient reasons given in tradition for some of the more famous voyages.*

Tradition fails to reveal the cause of the original migration to Vaitupu. In common with most of the atolls in the vicinity, Vaitupu has a legend which makes Samoa the original home of the race, but which simply states, with a distressing lack of detail, that Telematua, the founder, came in a canoe, unnamed, and settled on the island, which he found uninhabited. One might confidently assume that it could not have been the natural advantages of Vaitupu that led Telematua to settle there, for in those days there could have been nothing more attractive on such a lagoon-island than the usual coconut-jungle and a fair abundance of fish in the surrounding waters.

Another legend, imperfectly remembered, and discredited by the present generation, makes Vaitupu the first of all created lands, and its life the first life.

It has been shown by Grimble,† on the evidence of Gilbertese traditions, that fragments of that Tonga-fiti host which was driven out of Samoa in the thirteenth century, over-ran the islands of the Gilbert Group and it has been suggested (ibid) that the islands of the Ellice Group formed natural stepping-stones for that migration. The genealogical table of Vaitupu, however, establishes the date of original settlement of that island at about four centuries ago, i.e., some three hundred years later than the expulsion of the Tonga-fiti from Samoa. This is perhaps a matter of small importance, but the fact is worthy of being noted that the

* For example, Dr. Buck in J.P.S., Vol. 35, pp. 199-201, "Value of Tradition in Polynesian Research," finds the literal meaning of the reason given by tradition for the Arawa migration to be unacceptable, and ably shows that owing to dialectic vagaries in the connotation of a word the apparently worthless fruit over which a dispute arose may have been, indeed, a valuable foodstuff. Had no such valuable explanation been offered, the migration would, to my mind, still have been reasonable from the Polynesian point of view, since departure from the island would be the proper course to bring the chief, if not to shame on his own part, at least to a due repentance of his unworthy anger.

† Grimble: Myths from the Gilbert Islands, p. 103, and also "From Birth to Death in the Gilbert Islands," Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 51, January-June, 1921.
most fertile island of the Ellice Group was insufficiently attractive to any part of that swarm of home-seeking refugees. And it is indeed strange when it is considered that the Gilbert atolls, where many of them did finally settle, are, on the whole, much poorer in all natural advantages than those of the Ellice Group. The only explanation that suggests itself is that the Gilbert Islands were already inhabited by a people of proto-Polynesian stock, who, it has been assumed (loc. cit.), were descended from the ancestors of the Tonga-fiti themselves, and that the lands were, therefore, in a state of cultivation.

This brings us back to the suggestion that Vaitupu was originally settled accidentally by haphazard parties, probably from Samoa, drifting before the south-east Trade: and this point will receive further support from the evidence of pre-European culture.

Many words in old songs, the only reliable examples of the ancient dialect, show a linguistic relationship with Tonga, as distinctly opposed to the Samoa relationship. This may be the result of frequent visits of marauding and slave-seeking parties from Tonga, which are several times mentioned in the legends.

The general characteristics of these isolated Vaitupuans are essentially Polynesian, although their material culture and social organization are of a very low order of development. Their houses, canoes, tools, weapons, and textile manufactures indicate the simplicity and utility requisite to an ease-loving maritime people living in a moderately peaceful community, in no imminent danger from external enemies, and fearing nothing, unless it may be the infrequent famine caused by the failure of the seasonal rains. There is little attempt at decoration or ornamentation, and with the exception, perhaps, of their poetry, the fine arts are represented by the crudest beginnings. Wood-carving, ornamental shell-inlay, feather-work, fine-woven mats, decorative painting, tattoo, and the other arts and crafts usually associated with Polynesian culture had either no beginnings, or such immature development that they were readily swamped by the foreign innovations of later times. A canoe was esteemed for its size, sea-worthiness, and speed, and small
trouble was taken with the finish of its superstructure. A house was a shelter and had attached to it none of the sentiments of home, except insofar as it may have been the burial-place of a renowned ancestor, in which case sentiment was affected by animistic belief.

Manufactured articles of personal adornment had not attained to a state where they could compete for popular favour with the green leaves of the forest, poor bush-flowers, and shells of the reef. Of these last, the pearl-shell was indeed pregnant with poetical meaning, and the peculiar metaphors to which its qualities gave rise will be dealt with under the heading of poetry.

We are not concerned with the history of European discovery and subsequent developments except insofar as they affect the present investigation. Of the few competent observers who have chanced to visit the Ellice Group, none, with the notable exception of the several scientific expeditions to Funafuti, has left us any reliable record of the ancient life and customs. Of the traditional history of Vaitupu, a brief outline will suffice for introduction to the succeeding notes.

Telematua, as previously stated, making a journey from Samoa found Vaitupu uninhabited and settled there. His son was Foumatua and his grandson, Silanga. Silanga made a journey to Tonga, and taking to wife a Tongan woman, Kalasipa, returned with her to Vaitupu.

This is the genealogical table from Telematua to five of the more important families of the present day.
INTRODUCTORY.

1. Telematua
2. Foumatua
3. Silanga
4. Selu
5. Paolo
6. Tailoa
7. Fakaofo
8. Tefoto, Sika, Tafli
9. Fangalele Taufia
10. Savealakuto Sufanga Tateua Lupe(f) Umupo
11. Kailopa Telingo(f) Tekausi Lafou Fiti
12. Vakalimua(f) Niti Sepa Faioa Vete
13. Tione Tanielu Salatielu Vaisua Famotu
14. Pelo Pisi Teuteu Leupena Tealapai(f)

(Approx. age) 50 yrs. 50 15 40 10

Allowing 25 years to a generation will give a total of 350 years, thus fixing the advent of Telematua at some time in the fifteen-hundreds.

Another family-group traces descent by another line from Silanga, grandson of Telematua, and the Tongan woman Kalasipa, his second wife.

Silanga=Kalasipa (Tongan woman)

Tuluao
Kaiatemana
Takavasa
Talimailalo
Kailatutelu
Masisi
? (Name forgotten)
Fakalave
Poufanaika
This makes 18 generations from Telematua and would thus set back the date of settlement by about a century.

There are stories of inter-island journeys, visits from Gilbert Island voyagers, marauding fleets from Tonga in search of slaves, and of the exploits of various chiefs. Some of these will be referred to under "Traditions." In more recent times, there are garbled accounts of stray foreign settlers and black-birding raids. About 65 years ago, the first missionaries (Samoan pastors of the London Missionary Society) arrived in the group. By these, the whole population was, without difficulty, induced to accept Christianity. The pastors almost at once assumed autocratic power in the regulation of life and customs. That dialect of Samoa into which the Bible has been translated became the official language of the Ellice peoples. The result of this on Vaitupu, of which island the original dialect bore a much stronger resemblance to the dialects of southern and western than to those of nuclear Polynesia, has been the development of a hybrid patois quite incapable of transmitting the ancestral traditions and folk-lore.* These first pastors suppressed also all the old games, dances, and poetry, as well as the customary tattoo and ear-lobe-distension practices of ancient times.

We are not concerned to determine whether the enforced alteration of speech and customs has been to the advantage or otherwise of the islanders, but rather to indicate the factor which has been principally deterrent to ethnographic research. It is indeed only by the liberal application of twist tobacco that the old men can be induced to speak, somewhat

* See, for instance, the remarkable similarity between the Vaitupu dialect and that of Tikopia, published in the *Jour. Poly. Soc.*, vol. 35, No. 4 to vol. 36, No. 2—"A Tikopian Vocabulary"—Williams.
shamefacedly, of the ways of the *pouliuli* (dark ages) as the term is for the unenlightened times before the advent of the Christian Samoan.

The following notes deal then with a Polynesian community, living in a state of comparative isolation, over a period of 300-400 years, a community which, it may fairly be assumed, was founded accidentally, brought few previous racial traditions to bear on its development, and in which was evolving a primitive culture of local origin—a fact strikingly evident in the nomenclature of the lunar divisions of the seasons.

In the interest of accuracy, it should perhaps be stressed that these notes deal with the island of Vaitupu only, and, although many of the statements might apply equally well to the rites and customs of the peoples of other islands within the group, no claim is made that they represent the Ellice peoples as a whole.
The following papers have been submitted to the Committee for their consideration:

1. Report on the educational system of the province, submitted by Mr. Smith.
2. Recommendations for the improvement of the rural areas, submitted by Mrs. Brown.

The Committee is scheduled to meet on the 15th of next month to discuss the submitted papers in detail.

The meeting will be held at the provincial Capitol and is open to the public.