Tongan Society at the time of Captain Cook's visits: Discussions with Her Majesty Queen Sālote Tupou

by

Elizabeth Bott with the assistance of Tavi
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FOREWORD

This paper was originally written, with no intention of publication, as a field report for her Majesty Queen Sālote Tupou and the Tonga Traditions Committee of the Government of Tonga. It was based on extensive interviews with Queen Sālote supplemented by documentary research in the Palace Records Office and archives in London. The manuscript was left in the Palace Office in Nuku‘alofa, the capital of Tonga, for 15 years. Then, at the suggestion of Garth Rogers, and with help from him, Elizabeth Wood Ellem, and Wendy Pond, it was checked by Tavi (Preben Kauffmann) with living authorities and other available sources.

The aim of the paper is to describe the social and political organisation of the Kingdom of Tonga in the Western Pacific as it was when Captain Cook made his visits in the 1770s. Cook was not Tonga’s first European visitor. Schouten and Le Maire visited Tafahi and Niuafou‘ou in May 1616, and Tasman visited ‘Eua and Tongatapu in 1643. Wallis called at Tafahi and Niuatoputapu in 1767. But Cook was the first European visitor who stayed long enough to give a description of the country and its people. He was a keen and careful observer and, fortunately for us, he wrote down everything he saw, even when he did not understand what it meant. Besides being a superb navigator, he was richly endowed with curiosity about the habits and customs of his fellow beings, and was remarkably free from prejudice and feelings of superiority. His expeditions included several scientists who came, as did Cook himself, to learn about Nature in all its forms. The surgeon Anderson, on the third voyage, was a particularly acute observer.

The present account is divided into three chapters. The first describes Cook’s experience of Tongan society, with additional explanations and interpretations given by Queen Sālote. The second chapter gives a
generalised account of principles of Tongan political and social organisation in the 18th century, based partly on information and interpretations made by Queen Sālote, but also on written sources, on my own observations of Tonga in 1958-1960, and on discussions held at that time about both modern and traditional Tonga with many other informants besides the late Queen, Soakai of Haʻapai, the Honourable Veʻehala, Tupou Posesi Fanua, and Motuʻapuaka being the most important.2

The third chapter describes the events, largely as expressed in myths, legends, traditional stories, and genealogies, that are thought by Tongans to have led up to the form Tongan society assumed in the 18th century. For this section I have made some use of written sources, but much the most important material was told to me by Queen Sālote herself. This is particularly true of her detailed account of the legends, history and genealogies of the early Kanokupolu chiefs, much of which has not been documented before. Queen Sālote’s view of Tongan history was based, she explained, on stories and explanations given to her by her father and other senior relatives and on her own extensive discussions throughout her lifetime with experts in Tongan tradition. In our discussions she made use of the genealogies dictated by the last Tamahā, ‘Amelia, in the mid-19th century. Most of the material of our discussions is contained in two documents in the files of the Tonga Traditions Committee of the Government of Tonga: “Tohi ‘o Šene ‘Afio” and “Discussions on Tongan Custom, 1958-1960”. In writing this third chapter I have stayed fairly close to the content and tone of the account given to me by Queen Sālote.

The major documentary source is Cook’s Journals.3 Mariner’s vivid narrative of his four years in Tonga from 1806 to 1810 also proved invaluable, though it of course concerns a later time than that of Cook. In addition to books published by early travellers and missionaries such as de La Pérouse, Labillardière, Wilson, Vason, Wilkes, West, and Thomson, I was able to consult the unpublished letters and documents of the library of the Methodist Mission Society in London. The most valuable of these documents are two unpublished histories of Tonga by John Thomas, one of the early Wesleyan missionaries. His documents contain certain errors and are more biased than the works of Cook and Mariner, but they give much additional information. In particular, his account, however biased, makes it clear that Cook’s picture of Tonga as a peaceful, idyllic society was not correct. Conflict was endemic, and broke out into open struggle soon after Cook left. In addition to the accounts of Thomas, other missionaries, and travellers, I have made extensive use of the works of Wood, Gifford, Collocott, and the Beagleholes.

Tongan society has, of course, changed radically since the 18th cen-
tury. There were ferocious local wars from the early 1780s until 1852. Christianity was gradually adopted from 1826 onwards. The Constitution of 1875 made many changes in the traditional system of titles, authority, and political power, and considerable economic, political, and social change has occurred since 1875. But the principles of rank and kinship in the modern period are congruent with the descriptions by Cook and Mariner, and I have used my experience of modern Tonga to help to understand the traditional system. In fact, a feature that makes Tongan society particularly interesting to Polynesian scholars is that it is the only large centralised Polynesian chiefdom that has survived into the 20th century—much changed by European contact, but retaining its political independence and distinctive culture.

Since 1960 several anthropologists and historians, both Tongan and European, have made further studies of Tongan society and history. In the present account, however, no attempt is made to discuss or include their work.

This account, especially in its third chapter, presents a somewhat idealised picture of the classical period of Tongan society as visualised by Queen Sālote, then the greatest Tu‘i Kanokupolu authority. In the subsequent decade this view has become the new orthodoxy, but the authority of this orthodoxy can now be questioned, so that understanding of traditional and modern Tongan society may be enriched and deepened.

E.B.