SHAMANISM IN TONGA: AN ASSESSMENT

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The Tu‘i Tonga was a spiritual ruler, a direct descendant of the original Tongan gods. In 1842, when the last holder of the Tu‘i Tonga title converted to Catholicism, it brought an end to an association between that chief and Tangaloa as related in the Tongan origin myth. The god Tangaloa is just one element of the indigenous Tongan religion that can be found across Polynesia; Maui is another pan-Polynesian culture hero. Indigenous Tongan religion also shared the idea of a heaven with multiple skies, priests who learned sacred lore and performed religious rites, and people who become possessed by spirits and gods, on a more or less informal basis, and made pronouncements on their behalf.

On the surface, and taking a broad definition, these elements could suggest that such religions were shamanic, but there is some question as to whether this is the correct way to characterise the indigenous religion of Tonga. (The use of the term “indigenous” is preferable to the terms “pre-Christian” or “pre-contact” because many of the practices described have continued to the present day.)

This article examines the arguments of Niel Gunson that indigenous Tongan religion evolved from shamanism and retained some of these elements well into the 18th century, and that the Tu‘i Tonga himself was a master shaman. After outlining Gunson’s arguments, I will discuss some key features which scholars have proposed to define shamanism and examine whether they can be used as an analytical framework for characterising indigenous Tongan religious beliefs. Finally I will assess Gunson’s arguments in the light of this definition.

GUNSON AND SHAMANISM IN TONGA

Niel Gunson has been the strongest proponent for a Tongan shamanism. Over a period of almost 20 years he has described Tongan religion and mythology in terms of its having a shamanic origin, remnants of which are still evident in the origin myths and other extant tales. He has defined a shaman as “both visionary and healer, his or her skills obtained by inducing trance and exploring the metaphysical world”, and he has gone on to say that “[t]he shamans developed the first oral literature in the form of chants, spells and myth cycles” (Gunson 1993a: 145). This is a straightforward definition of shamans that is fairly uncomplicated. Elsewhere, Gunson has provided more detailed descriptions of shamans and the abilities he attributes to them, saying that they were
basically a medium or spirit traveller who has a certain control over the natural world through having access to the other spheres of existence, particularly the sky world or heavens, the underworld, and the ideal or mirror-image world. Shamans were both male and female, they practised sorcery and medicine, they claimed powers of levitation and astral projection, they frequently meditated on the tops of trees or high landmarks, and they claimed to be mediums for spirits, usually of gods or deceased persons, and to be able to metamorphose. Their characteristic was, however, their mastery of illusion, their claim of being able to manipulate time and space. (Gunson 1990: 14-15)

Gunson (2005: 325) recorded the belief in two human beings, Fonokitangata and Kaifaka’au, who both lived in central Tongatapu. Both had cannibalistic tendencies, and both were designated “shamans” by Gunson, although he did often qualify this label with a question mark. It was believed that Fonokitangata could travel over vast distances, transporting both himself and other objects. This description of shamans and their alleged capabilities is very wide-ranging, and the idea of the shamanic trance is implied rather than explicitly stated.

Beyond giving definitions of shamans, Gunson has applied these ideas to Polynesia in general (1993a), and in a very specific manner to Tonga in particular (1990, 1993b, in preparation), where he has used them to develop an argument for the Tu’i Tonga being a master shaman.

The Tu’i Tonga was the paramount chief of Tonga. He was said to be of semi-divine origin, the son of the sky god Tangaloa and a woman of earth, ‘Ilaheva Va’epopua. At first he embodied both executive and sacerdotal powers, but over time the lineage segmented collaterally to give rise to other chiefs who took on the executive side of ruling while the Tu’i Tonga was elevated to the position of being a spiritual ruler only. In keeping with Gunson’s view that shamans generated the earliest oral traditions, such as the cosmogenesis, the origin stories of the gods, the divine origin of the Tu’i Tonga and the origin myth of kava (Gunson 1993a: 147), Gunson claimed that the Tu’i Tonga himself could be seen as a master shaman. He wrote:

The Tu’i Tonga were… master shamans, closely connected with a school of learning which passed on esoteric lore, ethical teachings and worldly wisdom from generation to generation. The taula, or ordinary shaman in Tonga was merely an inspired person who claimed to contact the spirit world but who was relatively powerless in the presence of the Tu’i Tonga and mostly confined himself or herself to medical diagnosis and herbal healing or localised sorcery. The master shaman, on the other hand, was an initiate, a hereditary shaman with specialised knowledge instilled at a school of learning. (1993b: 1)
Gunson further argued the case that the Tu‘i Tonga was a master shaman by saying that the origin story for this lineage—in which the boy ‘Aho’eitu ascended to the sky in search of his father, was killed and eaten by his jealous half-brothers before being reconstituted by his father and being sent back to earth to rule as the first Tu‘i Tonga—was “a classic account of shamanic initiation” (Gunson 1993b: 2). He then referred to the palātavake, the feather headdress that was the possession of the Tu‘i Tonga, and drew parallels with the use of feathers as important elements of shamanic costume elsewhere. Gunson concluded by explaining that the status of the Tu‘i Tonga as a master shaman was lost when Tu‘i Tonga Pau, resentful of his son Fuanunuiava having been elevated to the co-regency during his lifetime, refused to pass on the tala-ē-fonua, the specialised knowledge he possessed.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SHAMANISM

While Gunson is an acknowledged expert on Polynesian oral traditions, his characterisation of Tongan religion as shamanic and of the Tu‘i Tonga as a master shaman is highly problematic. This will become evident through an examination of the key characteristics of shamanism: the shamanic trance, contact with the spirits and a specific notion of healing.

Mircea Eliade’s work *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964) is a key theoretical source for any discussion on this subject. More recent anthropological works have rejected the endeavour to codify the aspects of what constitutes a shaman and have wanted instead to interpret shamanic activity in a social and political context (see for example, Thomas and Humphrey 1994). However, that being said, these later writers have continued to use certain characteristics to define shamans and to contrast them with other categories of specialists in the sacred (see Hugh-Jones 1994, Lessa and Vogt 1979, Thomas 1994). In so doing they have perpetuated the work of Eliade.

Shamanic trance is the definitive element that sets shamans apart from other types of religious practitioners. Eliade wrote “shamanism = technique of ecstasy” (1964: 4), and of its practitioners he explained that:

> the shaman is… a medicine man and a magician; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians, whether primitive or modern. But beyond this he is a psychopomp [one who escorts souls to the afterworld] and he may also be a priest, mystic, and poet. (Eliade 1964: 4)

He cautioned that not all medicine men and magicians are shamans; neither are all people who are possessed by spirits from time to time.
There are elements of Eliade’s definition that are indeed consistent with those put forward by Gunson, such as the shaman’s alleged ability to perform certain types of miracles, but Eliade includes further key points that must be taken into consideration when considering whether the religion of a particular society may be labelled shamanic. The most telling of these is Eliade’s assertion that “any ecstatic cannot be considered a shaman; the shaman specializes in a trance, during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld” (1964: 5). Some common reasons for a shamanic trance being induced are to seek healing or, on the occasion of a death, to take on the role of psychopomp and conduct the soul of the deceased to the realm of the dead.

There is an element of performance in shamanic trances, suggesting that these episodes are voluntarily induced in order to visit spiritual realms so that social harmony can be restored in the world of the living (Hugh-Jones 1994: 35). Lewis (1971: 51) defined a shaman as being someone “who has mastered spirits and can at will introduce them into his own body”. He went on to write that the shaman “incarnates spirits, becoming possessed voluntarily in controlled circumstances” (Lewis 1971: 56). The voluntary nature of shamanic trance is further marked by the evidence from many cultures that shamans don special costumes before entering their trance state, and in some cases, their trance is induced by means of chanting, dancing, drumming or the use of hallucinogenic drugs (Eliade 1964: 145ff., 168; Yule 2005: 24).

It is through the shamanic trance and travel to other planes that the second key element is raised regarding the question of what constitutes a shaman, namely that of contact with the spirits. For Handy (1927: 135-40), Lessa and Vogt (1979: 301), Thomas (1994: 18-19) and Hugh-Jones (1994: 35), it was this contact with the spirits that set the shaman apart from another important specialist in the sacred and esoteric, the priest. Throughout Polynesia, the word taura and its cognates (taula in Tongan) is taken to refer to those individuals whose bodies became possessed by the gods or the spirits of deified chiefs, while tohunga and its cognates (tufunga in Tongan) refers to those people who were responsible for the teaching and learning of specialised knowledge. Hugh-Jones (1994: 35) added the further distinction that shamans are part-time specialists while the role of the priest is full-time. Thomas (1994: 18) noted that in Polynesia such priests were usually employed in the service of a chief, on whose behalf they performed their ceremonial duties. He also noted that the role of the tohunga was hereditary, while that of the shaman was not necessarily so and depended on the practitioner experiencing a possession episode.
TONGAN SPIRIT CONTACTS

There is no doubt that there were individuals in Tonga who had contact with the spirits—there are numerous descriptions of a wide variety of people who were possessed at various times. Mariner (Martin 1991) provided some of the earliest written descriptions of such possessions. He reported (1991: 84) that when the people wished to consult the gods on some particular matter, food and kava were prepared and the priest was placed in the position of honour at the head of the kava circle, because he was thought to actually become the god. When ready, the priest would become inspired and, “All that he says is supposed to be the declaration of the god, and he accordingly speaks in the first person as if he were a god. All this is done generally without any apparent inward emotion or outward agitation,” but occasionally, the priest would have a fierce face, an agitated frame, universal trembling, perspiring forehead, black convulsed lips, tears and a breast that heaved with emotion. This clearly is an example of spirit possession in which the possessed person performs an oracular role, a fact that is more explicit in Collocott’s (1919: 157) observation that priests were consulted “for information concerning risky undertakings”, for example, war or sickness.

One of the more telling of Mariner’s observations of spirit possession was the frequent inspiration of the son of his patron, the chief F‘inau, by the spirit of Tuku‘aho, the 14th Tu‘i Kanokupolu:

Mr Mariner… one day asked him how he felt himself when the spirit of Toogoo Aho [Tuku‘aho] visited him; he replied, that he could not well describe his feelings; but the best he could say of it was, that he felt himself all over in a glow of heat, and quite restless and uncomfortable, and did not feel his own personal identity as it were, but seemed to have a mind different from his own natural mind, his thoughts wandering upon strange and unusual subjects, although perfectly sensible of surrounding objects. He next asked him how he knew it was the spirit of Toogoo Aho? his answer was, “There’s a fool!” how can I tell you how I knew it; I felt and I knew it was so by a kind of consciousness, my mind told me that it was Toogoo Aho”. (Martin 1991: 86, emphasis in original)

Based on the above, F‘inau’s son certainly seemed to experience a form of shamanic trance in which he attained an altered state of consciousness, remaining aware of his surroundings yet also aware that his body was not his alone. There is an element of voluntary submission on the part of the person possessed in the cases described by Mariner and Collocott. However, these are cases of the spirit coming to the shaman, not the shaman journeying to the place of the spirits. There is a much stronger element of the person acting as a vehicle for the oracular pronouncements of the gods rather than the person
taking a shamanic voyage or going on a quest to the place of the spirits. As Eliade (1964: 5) pointed out, being an oracle or experiencing certain forms of ecstasy does not automatically mean that the practitioner can be considered a shaman. Carl Jung, in his discussion of shamans, wrote that the shaman’s “power resides in his supposed ability to leave his body and fly about the universe in the shape of a bird” (1978: 147), again emphasising that it is the shaman who is in control—the master of spirits—and not vice versa.

In many cultures where sickness is explained in terms of the supernatural, the shaman, by entering into a state of trance and dealing in the realm of the spiritual, is responsible for healing. The shamanic conception of sickness is spiritual, either because a malevolent spirit has entered the body of the patient or, worse, the soul of the patient has taken flight (Eliade 2004: 182, Yule 2005: 29). Lewis (1971: 51) stated that by the shaman’s power to enter into the spirit world, he is able to “treat and control afflictions caused by pathogenic spirits”. This is done in various ways, such as in rituals where the shaman calls to the wandering soul to return to its body, the presentation of sacrifices, and by the shaman’s soul voyaging into the realm of the spirits in order to hunt for, capture and restore the wayward soul to the patient (Eliade 1964: 182, 215).

In Tonga, sickness was one occasion when the advice of a priest may have been sought and, though Tongans usually attributed sickness to the supernatural, its treatment was not strictly shamanic in nature. Early European accounts of the causes and treatments of illness have a clear focus on fa‘ahikehe ‘beings from the other side’ as being the cause of sickness. These beings range from those who may be termed original gods to gods who are in reality the deified souls of deceased chiefs, and to other deceased family members who communicate with their living relatives for a range of reasons. The Wesleyan missionary John Thomas noted that when a chief was ill his relatives would go to the cemetery and see that it was

in good order, by clearing away the weeds and other things that may have become accumulated, reeding it round if the fence should have become bad, new thatching the roof of the house, for a neglect of these things would be considered a sufficient reason for the illness [sic] of the Chief—the spirits of his departed relatives being displeased would cause him to become afflicted. (Thomas n.d.a: 268)

The cemetery was clearly seen as a point of contact between the world of the living and Pulotu, the paradise in which the souls of chiefs dwelled after death. This was particularly marked by the annual presentation of the first-fruits offerings to the fertility deity Hikule‘o made at the royal tombs in Lapaha, the ancient capital of Tonga and seat of the Tu‘i Tonga himself (see Filihia 2001: 194-224). The practice of visiting the cemetery when someone
is ill seems to have continued uninterrupted from the pre-Christian era to the present day (see for example, Thomas letter-journal, Collocott 1923: 137-38, Gifford 1929: 342, Helu 1999: 38, Cowling 1990: 82-83). Gordon (1996:69) has summed this practice up thus:

The Tongan cemetery is a parallel world charged with power, where the concerns and activities of the dead mirror those of the living. [Graves] are resting places of beloved relatives who have reached the ultimate, orderly unification of social personhood with kindred and place of origin. But the cemetery is also an unpredictable, frightening domain in which the dead strike… the living, scrutinize them carefully, and bring them closer to the underworld.

Gordon’s description of the cemetery as a place where the social relations are emphasised further demonstrates that the Tongan etiology of sickness and cure, while related to the supernatural, is not seen in terms of shamanism but in terms of a disturbed social order. This view has been voiced by Tongan and non-Tongan observers alike (Cowling 1990, Fanua Bloomfield 2002, Gordon 1996, Helu 1999, Parsons 1983, van der Grijp 2002). Fanua Bloomfield in her study on traditional and modern medicine writes (2002: 34), “stress is placed on the social aspects of health. Sickness is considered to be caused by the breakdown of social relationships between inferior human beings and superior human beings, or between humans and the supernaturals”. Thus, when a person is ill, their first recourse is to their deceased relatives to ensure that their remains are comfortable and that their spirit does not need to alert the living to this discomfort by causing illness.

This conception of the cause of illness also applied to wider social relations, between the people and the gods. In this manner, “[i]llness… was seen as a punishment or warning from the supernaturals to individuals to abide within the norms of society” (Fanua Bloomfield 2002: 22). Sentiments to this end were certainly recorded by Thomas (n.d.a: 268-69) when he described the presentation of an ailing person to the gods.

When a person, called the Moehu [mōihū], which means a Leader of this service, or Intercessor, and who has come for the purpose, in a very humble, and distinct way, addresses the god, in a few words, stating who it is who has come, and what he is—and often strong words are used, expressing his great sinfulness, acknowledging the justice of the punishment inflicted and imploring the god to abate his anger, and let the chief live. There may be no reply from the god, but it would be expected that he would in due time give one.

A common theme in recent studies of ‘āvanga and te‘ia, spirit possession episodes that are often described as mahaki faka-Tonga ‘Tongan sicknesses’, is that there has been some breach of social codes or inappropriate behaviours
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that are being manifested through the work of the spirits. Paul van der Grijp (2002: 244) following Turner, framed illness and its cure in terms of a liminal rite of passage, in which there is a breach of social relations, followed by a mounting crisis, redressive action and either reintegration or legitimation. Cases in which the spirits are thought to have possessed unsuspecting victims are usually treated by a Tongan healer who will liberally drip infusions of medicinal leaves into the victim’s eyes, ears, nose and mouth. This is followed by massaging the limbs of the patient during which incantations may be recited to induce the spirit to leave the victim alone. The leaves are described as being namu tevolo ‘smelling of spirits’, and are thought to be repulsive to the spirits; the massage is said to squeeze the spirit out of the victim’s body. Often after the treatment, the victim can identify the spirit who visited him or her (see Collocott 1923:138, Gordon 1996:63-64, Helu 1999:38-40).

These episodes of spirit-induced sickness caused by a breach of social relations are not shamanic in nature. There is no indication of the healing practitioner going into a trance in order to seek the cause of the illness, although some practitioners have reported having visions or dreams that reveal the identity of the spirit responsible (see Gordon 1996: 64). There are some stories in which journeys are made to Pulotu in order to restore the life of a loved one, but in these it is usually the deity Hikule’o, the ruler of that domain, who restores the dead to life. This was the case in the story of Nuku‘okakala related by Collocott (1928: 35), in which a man, who was jealous of his brother’s beautiful wife, murdered his brother at sea. The dead appeared before Hikule’o and the man was restored to life in Pulotu before returning to earth. This was also the case in the story of “Rainbow and her Daughter” related by Fanua (n.d.: 65-83), although the Fanua story may simply be a variant of the one related by Collocott.

However, in the story of Lolongovava’u, the daughter of Hina and Sinilau, the restoration was effected on earth. In this story, Lolongovava’u lived in Pulotu at Hikule’o’s request, where she was looked after by her mother’s brother, ‘Ofamaikiatama. When Lolongovava’u was of a certain age, her uncle went up to the earth to seek a husband for her, and he found Lolomatokelau. ‘Ofamaikiatama returned to Pulotu to fetch Lolongovava’u and he stole the fan I-Taumo‘ui (Life-giving Fan) from Hikule’o before the two left. Lolongovava’u married Lolomatokelau, who unfortunately was slain by the handsome men of the place where he lived. The story continues:

‘Ofamaikiatama went, in Pulotu, to fetch water, and he met the soul of Lolomatokelau going along, and plucking a taro leaf, he wrapped the soul in it, and thrust it into his side [presumably into his girdle]. He left his task of fetching water for Hikuleo, and came with the Fan up to the world, where
he found Lolongovavau still weeping by the body of her husband. He placed 
the soul in… the body, and fanned with I Taumoui, and the man became alive 
again. (Collocott 1928: 20)

Far from being a journey to specifically resurrect his niece’s husband, the 
meeting, capture and return of the soul seems to take place by chance, so this 
is not strong evidence for shamanic healing practices.

The story entitled “The Origin of the Deity Fehuluni” is one story in which 
a journey was made to Pulotu in order to seek the cause of a family dying 
one by one (Gifford 1924: 153-55). In this story, a family had nine children. 
The eldest died and was buried, and the next day the next eldest died, and so 
on, until the seventh child, named Tui Ha‘atala, said,

“You remain here while I go and see what is the matter with us, for we are 
nailed all dead; perhaps there is someone that is carrying us off”. Thus he told 
them, “I am going, and I will leave my dead body in the cave… and should I 
be away a long time don’t bury my body, but leave it for me to return to it.” 
(Gifford 1924: 153)

He went to Pulotu, to the house of Hikule‘o, where he met the deity and asked 
what was wrong. Hikule‘o replied,

“All right, I have brought them to dwell with me; here we are all together, 
and we cannot bear for you to dwell in poverty on earth.” And again he said, 
“This day it was arranged to bring you,… But you shall return; and those that 
remain shall escape.” And Tui Haatala went outside and… went up to the earth. 
And when he went to his body, behold they had buried it as he was so long in 
returning. And he cried in grief… [and] he said, “I will not stay here; I will go 
and wander in other lands, and I will not go to Pulotu, because Hikuleo said 
we shall dwell here on earth we who are left.” (Gifford 1924: 154)

The spirit of Tu‘i Ha‘atala became known as the deity Fehuluni who takes 
the form of the sikotā ‘kingfisher’ (Thomas n.d.b: 41). In this story the soul 
that went on a voyage to another plane returned to take the form of a bird, 
an animal clearly associated with shamanism in many cultures. However, the 
body was thought to be dead while the soul was away and this is not the case 
in the shamanic trance proper. It is evident that the shaman, a human, stays 
in the one place while his soul is thought to travel. The shaman’s physical 
body remains in its trance among the people who are there for his séance, 
although he may be hidden from view by darkness or behind a curtain (see, for 
example, Rasmussen 1979). This again reinforces the element of performance 
that is a key element of shamanism.
The centrepiece of shamanism is the shamanic trance, in which the shaman’s soul leaves his or her body and travels to other planes. Shamanic religions involve a very specific concept of sickness and healing in which the shaman, through trance, performs an integral role. The shaman’s role is a public one and the trance often takes on the element of performance in an effort to bring well-being to the community. There is very little convincing evidence of such practice in pre-Christian Tonga. This makes Gunson’s characterisation of the Tu‘i Tonga as a master shaman extremely tenuous and further investigation in the light of the key characteristics of shamanism casts even more doubt on Gunson’s claims.

**TU‘I TONGA AS MASTER SHAMAN**

In the formulation of Lessa and Vogt (1979: 301), Thomas (1994: 18) and Hugh-Jones (1994: 35), what differentiates the shaman from the priest is that he or she derives his or her power from contact with the spirit world while the priest learns a body of codified knowledge and transmits it to his successors. This would indicate that the Tu‘i Tonga, in Gunson’s conception, was a priest more than a shaman. It seems, though, even this is debatable: some writers make it clear that Tongans did not consider the Tu‘i Tonga to be a priest, but simply the most highly-ranked of all chiefs by virtue of his supposed semi-divine origin (see for example Thomas n.d.c.: 1, Gifford 1929: 317). Others call him a priest or high priest (Luke 1954: 18, Orange 1840: 162), yet others do are non-committal, simply noting that the honours paid to him were because of his high birth (Neill 1955: 13, Thomson 1894: 291).

The best way to determine whether the Tu‘i Tonga may rightly be considered a master shaman is to see whether he did any of the things that shamans are supposed to do. The answer is clear: he did not. Although the Tu‘i Tonga was considered to be a descendant of the gods and therefore their representative, there appears to be no record of him being possessed by spirits or entering the trancelike state that is the key defining characteristic of the shaman. It is reasonable to expect that, in fulfilling this role, the Tu‘i Tonga would have knowledge of esoteric lore, but whether this can rightly be called the *tala-ē-fonua* as suggested by Gunson is also questionable. Mahina (1992: 10) described the *tala-ē-fonua* as the worldview of the Tongan people: “a collective attitude to life, a way of doing things”. Moreover, Gifford (1929: 76) notes that there was a priestess in Lapaha whom the Tu‘i Tonga consulted at times when he needed to communicate with the gods. This would seem to suggest that the Tu‘i Tonga was not himself in contact with the spirits, a key feature of shamanic practice.

There also appears to be no record of the Tu‘i Tonga being enlisted to heal people, other than to cure the illness known as *fula*, a kind of swelling in the
neck said to be caused by breaking a *tapu* in relation to people of a higher social rank (see Fanua Bloomfield 2002: 127). In such cases, the Tu‘i Tonga cured the patient by placing his hand on the swelling because the affliction could only be cured by a person of rank equal to or greater than the one who had been offended against. This is far from going into a trance and seeking a wayward soul in order to restore it to the patient, and is instead based on the notion of a breach in social relations and the restoration of the right social order. Gifford (1929: 344) gave an example of such an illness among commoners that was also described in these terms.

Other points in Gunson’s arguments can now be further examined. Gunson claimed that the *palätvake* ‘feathered headdress’ of Tu‘i Tonga Pau, who was met by Cook in 1777, was further confirmation that Pau was seen as a master shaman (Gunson 1993b: 6). This is because feathers are widely associated with shamans in cultures throughout the world, forming parts of costumes because of their association with birds and therefore representing magical flight and the ability to ascend into the heavens (Eliade 1964: 156-57, 177). The *palätvake* was most clearly associated with Pau and the Tu‘i Tonga.

There is a story (*Ko e Makasini ko e Lo‘au*, August 1970, Nuku‘alofa: Palace Office, File No. 50/2D) in the archive of the Tonga Tradition Committee that states that Pau rewarded a man of Foa with the *matapule* title of Helu because he was able to make a *palätvake*; apparently the knowledge was in danger of being lost and the reward was offered to anyone who could recreate the feathered headdress. However, Pau was not the only chief who had the privilege of wearing a feathered headdress. Gifford (1929: 127) notes that “a headdress of feathers (*fae* or *faefae*) was worn by chiefs during times of festival or ceremony or at the outset of a war expedition”. Given that the Tu‘i Tonga outranked all other chiefs, it is reasonable to expect that his headdress should be grander than all others. Feathers were widely used as decorations throughout Polynesia. They were used to decorate images of the gods and were closely associated with high chiefs in Tahiti and Hawaii, two other highly-stratified societies in Polynesia, being fashioned into the girdles and capes that were the mark of high office in those places. In Samoa feathers were used to decorate highly-prized fine mats (see Hooper 2006). Considering the widespread use of feathers throughout Polynesia it may not be accurate to read the Tu‘i Tonga’s symbol of rank in terms of shamanic signification.

Elements that Gunson uses to further show that the Tu‘i Tonga was a master shaman can be explained in other ways. For example the myth of the first Tu‘i Tonga’s dismemberment and regeneration is just as easily cast in terms of being an archetype as it is in terms of being shamanic. Archetypes are common mythological motifs that have grown out of the commonality of human experience (Campbell 1988: 51). There is also the fact of diffusion
to account for the similarity of these myths; for example, according to James Campbell (1988: 52),

… the art of tilling the soil goes forth from the area in which it was first developed, and along with it goes a mythology that has to do with fertilizing the earth, with planting and bringing up the food plants—some such myth… of killing a deity, cutting it up, burying its members and having the food plants grow. Such a myth will accompany an agricultural or planting tradition. But you won’t find it in a hunting culture. So there are historical as well as psychological aspects of this problem of the similarity of myths.

This is consistent with Māhina’s (1990: 37) observations regarding the nature of myths, namely that they are “social phenomena and they are historical…. because they are about actual situations that took place in space and time, in society; a reflection of the interplay of social demands”.

Thomas (1994), taking a looser definition of the term shaman than that employed here, made a study of shamanism in Oceania and its relation to politics, examining the correlation between the level of shamanic activities and the degree of stratification in Polynesian societies. He found that in places where there was a well-developed hierarchy, shamanic activity was marginalised, while in places where chieftainship was less highly-stratified, shamans were powerful spiritual practitioners who were able to exert some influence in the political domain. Thomas, after noting the shaman’s close relationship to the gods through spirit possession wrote:

Chiefs were also close to the gods but the nature of their proximity was quite different. The relation was one of genealogical continuity that enabled action on behalf of gods or humans at distinct moments. The chief stood for deities (and the ancestral line in particular) and could thus receive sacrifices or offerings, such as firstfruits [sic], on their behalf. As a representative of society, the chief could also make sacrifices to the gods. The chief’s role was a matter of signification rather than incarnation. Chiefs lacked the shaman’s basis for practical work in the overlapping of po [the world of the spirits] and ao [the world of mortals]. (Thomas 1994: 21)

Following from Thomas’s definitive statement, highly-ranked chiefs like the Tu’i Tonga were representatives of the gods, but were not subject to possession by the gods. In the past the Tu’i Tonga was the sole paramount ruler. Descent from the gods formed the basis of the rank and honours that were accorded to such chiefs, but they did not share the same abilities of those people that Thomas referred to as shamans.

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Although there were people in Tonga who were possessed by spirits with varying degrees of frequency, there is no indication that these people experienced the classical shamanic trance such as that experienced in the circumpolar region, the region where the phenomenon was first described. Although there is a sense that some Tongan possessions could be brought on at will, there is no sense that the soul of the possessed person was thought to voyage to the realms of the spirits. This is a key criterion in deciding whether a religion may rightly be considered shamanic. A second criterion is that of the conception of sickness and its treatment. Here, too, there is no evidence of a shamanic approach in Tonga, although sickness is often attributed to supernatural causes. Healers in Tonga do not employ shamanic trance in order to restore the missing soul to the patient.

In the absence of evidence of shamanism in its classical sense existing in Tonga, it is highly problematic to classify the Tuʻi Tonga as a master shaman. This is especially so since there is no agreement about whether he could rightly be considered a priest. He was clearly considered to be a direct lineal descendant of the gods, and their representative on earth. He was the holder of a body of codified knowledge, but this alone does not classify him as a shaman. Nor is there any persuasive evidence that the Tuʻi Tonga had direct contact with spirits, the third criterion in deciding whether a religion is shamanic in the classical sense. Moreover, alternative interpretative frameworks can be employed to discuss the other elements seemingly associated with shamanic lore and practice: the regeneration of the Tuʻi Tonga in the myth of that chief’s origin is just as much an agricultural archetype as it is evidence for shamanic initiation.

Gunson’s thinking on shamanism has been influential, but he has employed a loose definition of shamanism in his work on Tonga, and his characterisation of the Tuʻi Tonga as a master shaman is misguided. While there are elements that may be fruitfully compared to shamanism, both within Polynesia and in other areas of the world, and there are stories that may be said to have a shamanic theme, there is not enough evidence to classify the pre-Christian religion of Tonga as shamanic in a very strict sense of the word. It is true that the religion has not remained static for millennia, and that the beliefs of the people who settled the island have changed together with the society they created. But, on the basis of evidence examined here, “shamanism” is not an accurate way to describe the pre-Christian religious practices of Tonga, nor can the Tuʻi Tonga legitimately be characterised as a master shaman.
REFERENCES


Thomas, J., n.d.a. Mythology of the Tongans. Typescript. [Copy owned by Dr Elizabeth Wood-Ellem].


