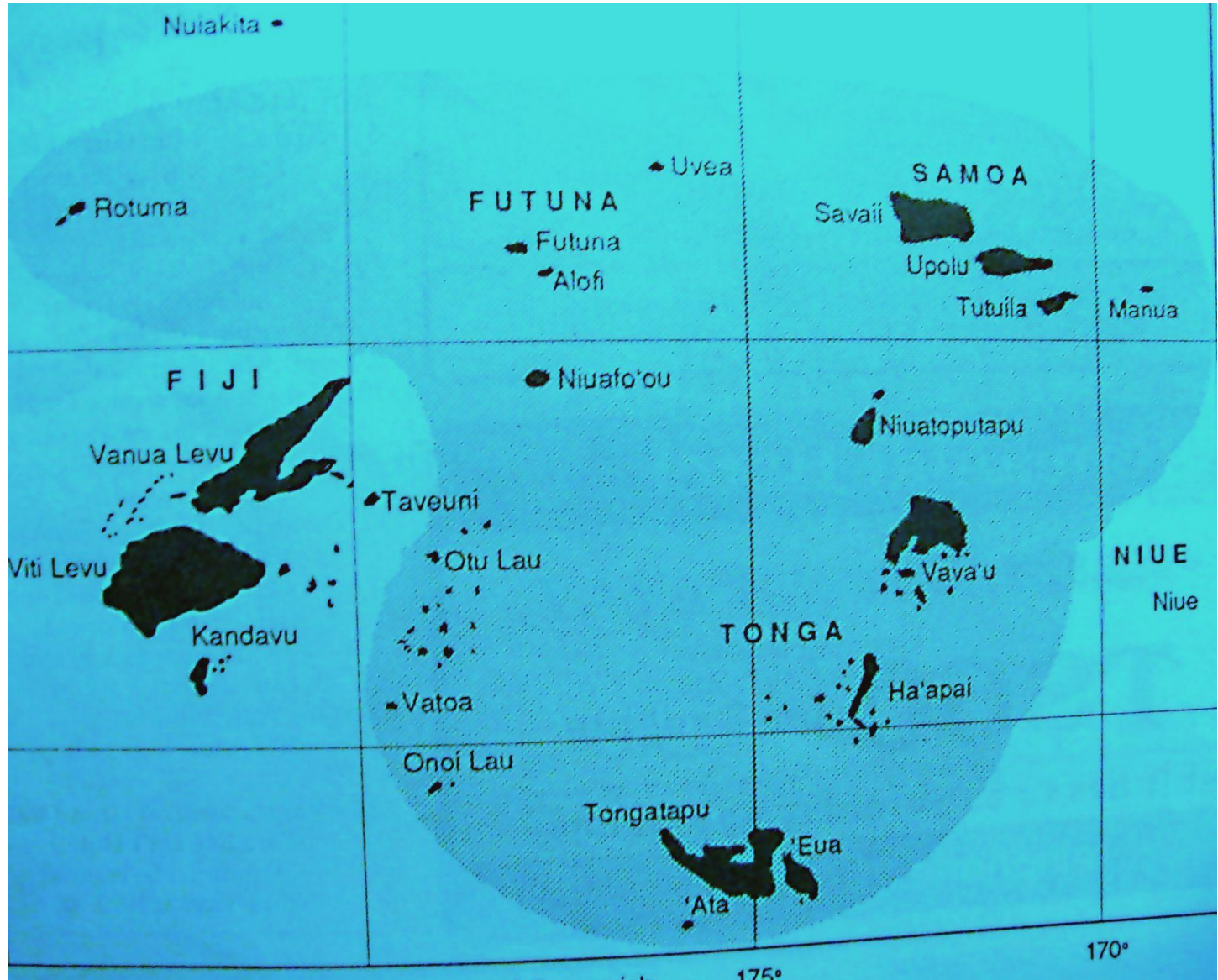


The History of Tonga, 15th-18th centuries

*Constructed from Sione Lātūkefu's PhD thesis *CHURCH AND STATE IN TONGA: THE INFLUENCE OF THE WESLEYAN METHODIST MISSIONARIES ON THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TONGA, 1826-1875*



- Authority in Tonga had a direct link with the concept of **'eiki**, which was the term used both for those possessing a chiefly title and for the ranking of individuals throughout the whole society. Every person had some authority over those others to whom he or she was 'eiki, but, lacking a title, one's 'eiki merely gave ceremonial precedence. Administrative, judicial and even personal powers were confined to the title-holding 'eiki who was head of a socio-political unit, and whose degree of authority increased with the size of the unit to which he was 'eiki.
- Commoners did not play any active part in politics. They were completely under the domination of their superiors and served them in every way. Slaves were mainly prisoners of war, and were treated as part of the huge households of their captors, who were, of course, always chiefs. As a result they often enjoyed privileges which the commoners would never have enjoyed.

- The prominent position held by women in Tongan society enabled some women of rank to play an important role in Tongan politics, although they were not normally title-holders.
- A system of taboos and obligations governed the relationships within the family and household were the basis of the rules governing wider social units. Thus, the taboos were magnified according to a person's position in the social hierarchy and to his responsibilities.
- Personal sanctity found its culmination in the person of the **Tu'i Tonga**. Since the first Tu'i Tonga was believed to be directly descended from a union between a divine father, the god of the sky, and an earthly mother, the sanctity of this dynasty was pre-eminent. The other chiefs derived their own sanctity, ultimately, from their relationship to the Tu'i Tonga.
- The whole of Tonga was under the sovereignty of the Tu'i Tonga. Originally the Tu'i Tonga was both the temporal and spiritual ruler.
- The Tongan system of land tenure rested upon the assumption that, owing to his divine origin, the Tu'i Tonga controlled all land and that the rights possessed by others, therefore, derived from him. In recognition of this, an annual festival of 'Inasi, (offering of the first fruits to him) was held. It was believed that failure to carry out the 'Inasi would result in calamity and the whole land would suffer from the divine wrath.
- The land was gradually divided among the **hou'eiki lalahi** (principal chiefs) as the population increased with the years, and, in practice, they became the effective controllers of the land. Once atofi'a (hereditary estate) had been allocated to an 'eiki lahi, it remained associated with his title and the Tu'i Tonga never revoked it.
- The economy of Tonga depended largely upon the labour of the **tu'a** (commoner class). They tilled the land, fished the sea and cared for the domestic animals. Some may conclude that the tu'a were mere slaves of the chiefs. Actually, this was not generally the case, particularly while the system was operating effectively. The key to the whole economic system was the underlying principle of reciprocity. The mere fact that the commoners loyally served their chief and carried out their obligations towards him, made it difficult for him to deprive them of their land or in other ways abuse his authority.
- Any assertion that the commoners were always forced to serve the chiefs, or that fear was the sole motive behind the fulfilment of their responsibilities, may be attributed to a lack of true understanding of the anga faka Tonga (Tongan way of life).
- The favourable climate, the abundance of tropical fruit and other staple foods, and soil that amply repaid crude and slight cultivation, enabled the production of a sufficient surplus to permit the few, who held responsible and privileged positions, to abstain from manual work. In fact, it was largely

due to the respect paid to their positions that peace and order prevailed and that the subsistence economy flourished.

- Formal training institutions were virtually unknown in Tonga. The younger generation learned by imitating their elders, in the various social classes. Young girls of the tu'a class stayed at home helping their mothers with domestic responsibilities. They gradually learned the skills required in women's work, which included the manufacture of tapa cloth, mats and coiled baskets. The boys would follow the older men to the gardens or to the sea, gradually learning the tasks which men were expected to perform. As a result, parents tended to pass on their skills or occupations to their children.
- The Tongans were polytheistic and possessed a hierarchy of gods. Kau inima (the cutting off of fingers as a sacrifice) and even human sacrifices were often given to the gods in order to save the life of a chief. So it was that natural disaster, disease, death and famine were attributed to the anger of the gods or the displeasure of the spirits of dead relatives .
- While Tonga was occupied by a fairly small population, the embodiment of both the spiritual and temporal administration in the person of the Tu'i Tonga appeared to have been adequate for a time. But with the expansion of population, and possibly other political pressures, the task of controlling both these spheres became too much for one person.
- Evidence of political instability during the fifteenth century is shown by the frequent assassinations of the Tu'i Tonga.
- A new, administrative position – the **Hau** - emerged which was filled by a new “kingly title”, the **Tu'i Ha'atakalaua**. For several generations the two lines existed side by side. Increasingly, administrative roles passed from the Tu'i Tonga to the Hau (Tu'i Ha'atakalaua).
- The sixth Hau created another kingly line, the **Tu'i Kanokupolu**, and the responsibilities of administering the affairs of the country were thus transferred to the Tu'i Kanokupolu line.

Therefore, Tonga has three “kingly lines”:

Tu'i Tonga	
Tu'i Ha'atakalaua	Tu'i Kanokupolu

- The secular authority which had passed to the Hau was largely nominal and ceremonial. The actual power then rested with the chiefs of the various regions. This power was absolute and arbitrary though, when properly executed, the rather severe punishments it occasionally dealt, together with fear of divine retribution for violations of the taboos, served as a deterrent which helped to maintain stability, peace and prosperity in the land. However, the absolute nature of the power of the chiefs contained the seeds of their own destruction. As chiefly ambitions grew they threatened the unity of the whole society, and, as power was abused for selfish ends, a period of political turbulence and misery was ushered in, following upon the relatively peaceful, orderly and prosperous years of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
- Contact with the neighbouring islands, especially Samoa and other Polynesian islands, had been sporadic since the thirteenth century or even before,"*but that which is of greatest importance was the contact with the islands of Fiji.
- In Fiji, the Tongans were fascinated by the variety of articles, which were either not available in their home islands or superior to anything of a similar kind which they had at home. Unlike Tonga, which had very little timber, and that of poor quality, Fiji was rich in first quality timber forests, and the Fijians were far superior to the Tongans in manual skills. Spears, bowls, huge double canoes, pottery, sandal-wood which grew in abundance in Fiji, were highly prized by the Tongans and lead to a dramatic increase in traffic between the island groups in the 18th century.
 - It was Fiji that introduced Tonga to the practice of cannibalism.
- Power struggles in Tonga erupted into Civil War in the late 1700s. It was also around this time that permanent European contact was established.



The Ha'amonga 'a Maui on Tongatapu