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PAUL VAN DER GRIJP*

THE MAKING OF A MODERN CHIEFDOM STATE: THE CASE OF TONGA

Tonga has never been colonized by a foreign political system of government. However, never having been officially colonized does not mean it has been completely independent. In the nineteenth century, Tonga developed from a situation in which several groups of chiefs dominated the islands, to a centralized state power with a king: a modern chiefdom state. Tonga is a modern state with all the usual requirements: a government with a parliament, civil service, legislation, judges, police, army, school system, health care, post office, etc. At the same time, however, it has several characteristics of a chiefdom, although in an adapted form.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Tonga was involved in a civil war. There were political intrigues, political murders, and field battles in which hundreds and sometimes thousands of people participated. During this civil war, one of the competing chiefs, with the aid of European firearms and the moral support of European missionaries, was able to centralize political power in the Tongan archipelago. Following the western, or, to be more precise, British example, this chief, whose name was Tautafa'ahau, was made King of Tonga in 1845. During the following decades his authority was legitimized by several codes of law. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, certain chiefs were given noble titles, *nopele* in Tongan, with corresponding land properties. Since then, beside the royal family these *nopele* have been the most important source of power in Tongan politics, although recently their influence has been challenged by members of the new middle class, such as hospital workers and school

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teachers. At the moment, there are still 33 *nopele*.

The historical transition from a multitude of chiefdoms to a modern chiefdom state paralleled the conversion of the entire Tongan population to Christianity, at that time about 20,000 people. By the 1850s, the conversion to Christianity and state formation were complete, at least nominally: there was one religion (although with competing churches) and one head of state. However, this hegemony was threatened. Internally, the various chiefs posed a threat because they did not accept the reduction of their traditional power. The Methodist missionaries, who came from Great Britain, formed an opposing force as well. In the beginning, they gave full support to the King of Tonga, that is, before he became king. But as soon as he began asking for political advice from other westerners, the Methodist missionaries realized that their influence on him was weakening, and they encouraged annexation by their home country, Great Britain. The Roman Catholic missionaries, concurrently, hoped for annexation by the country from which they came: France. Among the increasing number of copra traders were many Germans, and of course their colonial hope was aimed at Germany. Thus, the external threats to Tonga's very young state power were already outlined: annexation by one of the then increasingly aggressive, expanding European colonial powers.

In this article, I analyse how Tonga was able to stand up to these threats. Two western advisors - a journalist and a renegade missionary - played important roles. The main figure, however, was Siaosi Tafa'ahau Tupou I, the first King of Tonga. My hypothesis is that in the beginning he needed the help of the Methodist mission to transform the Tongan chiefdom into a state, a chiefdom state, but that at a certain stage, this mission became an obstacle to the development of his state power. When, against the background of the colonial turbulence, he became aware that their paternalistic attitude was not accompanied by useful political knowledge, he had to abandon missionary influences. Elsewhere (Van der Grijp 1992, 1993), I have dealt with the preceding rapprochement and coalition between the Methodist mission and Tafa'ahau; here I will focus on the stage of distancing.¹

Mediator at a distance: Charles St Julian

After the last episode of the Tongan civil war, it became rather quiet in Tonga. The abolition of the British Navigation Acts in 1848 removed the

¹ I would like to thank Alan Howard and Leontine Visser for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this article.

last barrier. Gold fever, first in California and later in Australia, stimulated connections throughout the Pacific, and shipping traffic between Sydney and San Francisco became more regular. Taufa'ahau took advantage of this opportunity to make a trip abroad to have a closer look at western civilization, about which he had heard so much. In the middle of the nineteenth century, transportation between Australia and the Pacific Islands intensified. The Methodist missionary, Rabone, encouraged Taufa'ahau to visit Sydney to see with his own eyes how 'civilized people' lived. Taufa'ahau wanted to leave immediately on a European war vessel that happened to be in Tongan waters. However, fearing 'influences unfriendly to his spirituality [...] in such a vessel' (Young 1854: 213), the missionaries insisted on his waiting for their own missionary ship, the *John Wesley*.

In Sydney, Taufa'ahau met the journalist Charles St Julian, who worked as a legal reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. St Julian introduced himself as the representative of the King of Hawaii in, as he liked to call it, the Independent States and Tribes of Polynesia. St Julian was an ardent promotor of a pan-Polynesian movement. In his career as a journalist he had turned himself into a legal specialist - although he had no legal background - and he was prepared to advise Taufa'ahau in matters of legislation. After Taufa'ahau went back to Tonga, St Julian repeated his offer in a series of letters. Since the missionaries in Tonga had little experience in legal affairs, Taufa'ahau welcomed the advice. St Julian based his advice on the Hawaiian example, and he advised Taufa'ahau to organize the kingdom of Tonga following the western model. Like Hawaii, Tonga would be recognized at the international level as an independent nation.² However, the missionaries in Tonga disapproved of St Julian's influence, seeing their own grip on Taufa'ahau weaken. St Julian was a Roman Catholic liberal of French origin, 'totally at odds with the Protestant, theocratic and anti-French system for which they stood in Tonga' (Nothling 1978: 26). The following portrait by the historian Marion Nothling is a poignant characterization:

Like many well educated men of his time, St Julian's training made him a Jack of all trades, a master of none. He lacked specific training for the law, and his efforts at constitution-making shows his theoretical approach. In social attitudes he was a liberal of the old school, with a genuine concern for the working men but the

² St Julian saw it as his task to advance the development of Polynesian societies as independent mini-states. For that aim he gave his advice against the background of what Nothling (1978: 23) calls 'his hobby of constitution-making'. The Constitutions of Fiji (1871) and Tonga (1875) 'both owe much to Hawaiian precedent' (Nothling 1978: 21).

assurance that he was not of their number; and his ideas of equality are perverted both by his snobbishness and fascination with the trappings of authority, and by his notion of white superiority - although in this he was typical of his period, and more humane than most. It is interesting that his respect for rank considerably influenced his approach to rulers such as the Hawaiian kings, George of Tonga and Cakobau of Fiji (1978: 32).

Taufa'ahau did not immediately follow St Julian's advice. The latter became impatient and in 1854 he published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* an article full of reproaches about the wrongs in Tongan government: Taufa'ahau gave the impression of being 'a mere missionary puppet' (quoted in Nothling 1978: 24). In 1857, however, Taufa'ahau proposed changes, such as a separation of powers and limitations of judges' responsibilities. The missionaries did not like St Julian's influence on Taufa'ahau, and when St Julian made a request to be appointed British Consul in Tonga, the missionaries asked the British Secretary for the Colonies to reject the request. In London, the rejection was further supported by Elijah Hoole, Secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. As a result, St Julian was turned down. For the time being, a British consul was not appointed in Tonga. When Taufa'ahau heard this news he was furious and decided to no longer accept missionary advice, but to follow the advice of St Julian.

One of Taufa'ahau's biggest problems was obtaining the co-operation of the chiefs. Among them were many adversaries from the period of the civil war. In 1859, Taufa'ahau convened a *fakataha*, a meeting of chiefs, and announced his plans to modernize Tonga by introducing western civilization. In 1860 and 1861, additional *fakataha* were held, but none of these meetings resulted in Taufa'ahau's goal, which actually implied a further reduction of the chiefs' powers. During the meeting in 1861, for example, he proposed to abolish the *fatongia*, the chief's traditional right to have control over the labour and possessions of the common people. The chiefs, headed by Tungi, who was the descendant of a lineage opposed to Taufa'ahau during the civil war, stubbornly resisted the proposal. But during a *fakataha* in May 1862, Taufa'ahau succeeded in having adopted a set of bills which went further than former laws. Ten years prior, for example, during a meeting of chiefs at the end of the civil war, the following rules had been imposed:

The system of *tabu* is abolished. All slaves are hereby set at liberty, and no man is to keep a slave or other person in bondage. All persons are to dress modestly and becomingly. All crime will be punished, and the laws already printed are to be enforced

throughout the land. All Chiefs and notables are to be respected. All children are to be sent to school [...] for on this depends the future welfare of our Nation (WMMS 1853: 38).

We see here a legitimation of the transition from a traditional chiefly system based on *tapu* to a new system of power and authority reflecting missionary influence. Via the school system, organized and dominated by the missionaries, every Tongan individual was expected to go through the ideological factory. In the new code of 1862, the King himself was subject to the law. Basil Thomson called it a 'constitution' because it also regulated the governing system of the country (Thomson 1894: 223). The traditional power of the chiefs was reduced to a large extent. 'Either the chiefs were cowed or they were won over by a promise of a cash pension', according to Rutherford (1971: 18), but in any case they accepted Taufa'ahau's proposals.

Mediator between king and colonists: Shirley Baker

To understand the rupture between Taufa'ahau and the Methodist mission we have to go further back in history. At the insistence of the Methodist missionaries, in 1844, Taufa'ahau's great-uncle, the High Chief Aleamotu'a, had sent a letter requesting protection from the King of England. Aleamotu'a's request, however, was not answered. Then, in 1848, Taufa'ahau handed the Methodist missionary, Walter Lawry, a letter for George Grey, Governor of New Zealand, with another request for British protection. Either due to a mistake in the English translation of the letter ('desiring to be under the shadow of British power'), or as a result of wishful thinking on the part of Lawry, British authorities had the impression that the Tongans wanted to become 'not merely the allies, but the subjects of the (British) Queen' (Lawry 1850: 24). After the discovery of this misunderstanding, Taufa'ahau was very disappointed. In an interview during Lawry's next visit, Taufa'ahau made it clear that he never intended to give up Tonga's independence. He wanted British friendship and protection, but said: 'it is not in my mind, nor in the mind of my people, that we should be subject to any other people or kingdom in this world' (cited in Lawry 1851: 72). At this stage, however, the British government had no intention of annexing Tonga (Morrell 1960). This possibly intentional mistake in the translation of Taufa'ahau's request for protection (and not British annexation) was one reason for the tensions between Taufa'ahau and the mission, and a reason for Taufa'ahau to seek out other foreign advisors. St Julian was one of them. But there were others to follow.

In 1860, the young missionary Shirley Baker arrived from Australia. From the start he made himself useful as a medical practitioner. Since Taufa'ahau's wife Salote was severely ill, he visited them regularly. During one of his visits in the first half of 1862, Taufa'ahau asked Baker's advice on the coming *fakataha* in which he wanted to propose reforms in the state organization. In doing so, Taufa'ahau deviated from his former determination to no longer take missionary advice. Under the influence of Charles St Julian, Taufa'ahau's ideas had already taken shape, and at this stage Baker's real contribution probably only consisted in his editing the written version.³ But Baker's role became more and more important. In 1864 he developed a set of rules and laws, for example, on the making and maintenance of roads. According to his daughters (Baker and Baker 1951: 8), Taufa'ahau invited Baker to become the premier. Baker refused, because he was still a missionary.

In neighbouring Samoa and Fiji, European colonists had now formed western-style governments together with indigenous chiefs. Taufa'ahau and Baker intended to prevent such a strong influence from European settlers in Tonga. Therefore, it appeared necessary for them to create a western-style government themselves, but with Tongans in control. By doing so, annexation by a western power could be prevented, which had also been the leading idea of St Julian. Baker designed the Tongan Constitution, which was put before the chiefs in 1875. It was a further refinement and confirmation of earlier laws, as well as the written proclamation of a constitutional monarchy. The Constitution consisted of three parts: 1) a general set of regulations on rights and duties; 2) articles regulating the form of government; and 3) a set of regulations governing the land tenure system. Besides the twenty noble titleholders (*nopele*) whom Taufa'ahau appointed, all the chiefs were now formally (in law) the same as common people (*tu'a*). However, the fact that all Tongans were equal before the law was, according to some, a measure designed to neutralize criticisms by Europeans, rather than an answer to real needs of the Tongans.⁴

On the advice of other missionaries and the British Consul Arthur Gordon, the missionary headquarters in Australia investigated Baker's behaviour. This investigation resulted in Baker being sent on an extended furlough to Australia. Although the accusations against him were declared

³ Much has been written on the actual influence of Baker on Taufa'ahau (e.g. Latukefu 1970, 1974; Rutherford 1971, 1977). The book by Lillian and Beatrice Baker (1951), the daughters of Shirley, has been called a naïve work that one should use with great care, 'since it attributes all that was done in Tonga to Baker' (Morrell 1960: 317, n. 4).

⁴ Campbell, for example, says: 'the guarantees of freedom given to the Tongans were a means of satisfying foreigners rather than an objective in themselves' (1992: 78).

invalid, Baker was forbidden to return to Tonga as a missionary. When he left Tonga, he was in the company of Taufa'ahau's son Tevita Unga, who was then Premier of Tonga. Tevita Unga was very sick and hoped to get effective medical treatment in Auckland. But he died. Baker arranged transportation of the body to Tonga, and he himself returned to Tonga shortly thereafter. In September 1881, after Baker declared that he was no longer a missionary, Taufa'ahau appointed him Premier, and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Land Affairs. As premier, Baker succeeded in settling the government's debts within two years.

In 1885, Taufa'ahau and Baker founded the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga (in Tongan: *Siasi Uesiliani Tau'ataina 'o Tonga*). By 'free' they meant completely independent of the Australian headquarters. Baker's version of the origin of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, as he explained it to the later British High Commissioner Thurston, was that the Tongan chiefs were disappointed about the unwillingness of the New South Wales Conference to give them a say in the appointment of ministers in their country. Furthermore, they did not approve of the £3000 to 4000 of fund-raising money leaving Tonga every year for missionary activities elsewhere in the Pacific (Scarr 1980: 150).

In 1886, an assault was made on Baker's life. Baker himself escaped, but his son and a daughter were wounded. Five escaped prisoners, who had been imprisoned because of their resistance to Baker and Taufa'ahau, were responsible for the assault. All five, and an accomplice, were executed. Baker and Taufa'ahau thought the old Wesleyans were partly responsible. Sympathizers of Taufa'ahau made punitive expeditions on Tonga's main island Tongatapu, where they intimidated and beat up Wesleyans and destroyed their possessions (Rutherford 1971: 139-147). The correspondent of the *Fiji Times* in Tonga reported that the government had instructed the local authorities 'to flog and torture the Wesleyans until they turned over to the so called Free Church'. The instructions were carried out in the following way:

As soon as the early service in the Free Church was over, about 9 a.m., the authorities proceeded to their work. One unfortunate lad from Mr. Moulton's college, the son of one of the oldest Wesleyan ministers lately deceased, was asked whether he would turn [i.e., to the new church]; declining he received seventy-two lashes across his back, the seventy-third was given him quite unexpectedly across the chest and caused him to call out on the Lord for mercy. The seventy-fourth received across his face, damaging one of his eyes, and the seventy-fifth and last across his head and neck. This lad's name is Jione Havea. An old woman was now interrogated, and she refused to enter Watkin's church, she also was brutally flogged.

Nature, however, came to her rescue. She fainted after the third lash, and the wretches could do no more to her as she lay senseless on the ground. Her name is Mele Tahī (*Fiji Times* 9 March 1887).⁵

Others were flogged as well. The two cases described were representative, according to the correspondent. In the end, 200 unwilling Tongans were exiled to Fiji, and many others to uninhabited volcanic islands within Tonga. The influence of the old Methodist mission was now reduced to a minimum: 'Tonga is not now a Mission District as it has been for some years past a District in connection with the N.S. Wales and Queensland Conference' (WMMS 1890: 139). However, the mission wanted to keep its influence in Tonga and worked towards unifying the two Methodist churches. What prevented a quick reunion, however, was that:

many of our faithful people are still kept in exile though unaccused of any crime, but solely on account of their attachment to our Church; that proceedings, which can only be classed as persecutions under 'cover' of law, are still carried on against Wesleyans, not only to punish the so-called offenders, but to deter others from joining us; and that our Church in Tonga still suffers disabilities from which the Free Church and the Roman Catholics are exempt (WMMS 1890: 139-40).

European settlers reported to the British Consul, R.B. Leefe. The British government sent the High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, Charles Mitchell, to investigate the matter in Tonga. Mitchell concluded that neither Baker nor Taufa'ahau were directly responsible for the disturbances. As a warning, however, he informed Taufa'ahau that he could have Baker deported from Tonga. At this time, Great Britain, Germany and the USA were negotiating their respective spheres of influence in the area. Germany would have welcomed British annexation of Tonga as an excuse to annex Samoa.

Baker felt increasing pressure from the unsatisfied European settlers. In response, his dealings with them became sharper. Land leases were not

⁵ Together with two other emigrants, the reporter, a British national, had a closer look at the two flogged persons. The situation of the boy was serious: 'His back was just one mass of dark livid bruises and his head injured. The woman's back appeared as if she had received more than a dozen lashes, and no wonder, for these persons were flogged with six rope ends somewhat thicker and harder than ordinary clothes line; each lash equal to six, and the blows were given by a powerful man with all the force of which he was able, raising himself to tiptoe the better to deliver his cruel flagellation' (*Fiji Times* 9 March 1887).

extended, and payment of taxes was more strictly controlled. He also required that taxes be paid in British pounds and no longer in Chilean silver dollars, which were in use until then. He also became more and more aggressive towards the representatives of British government. He accused, for example, the British Vice-Consul of conspiring in the assault against him, and criticized Reverend George Brown, Moulton's substitute, and the new British High Commissioner, Thurston. Initially, Thurston was favourably disposed toward Baker, but when he visited Tonga in 1890 he was persuaded by the discontented chiefs to ask Taufa'ahau to dismiss Baker as premier. Thurston ordered Baker to leave Tonga by the first ship. One of the main reasons was Baker's refusal to let the exiled Tongans return to their country.

By the time of Baker's departure, the political situation in Tonga was chaotic. Moreover, in 1890, the copra price decreased, so the government was not able to pay its own civil servants, nor to pay off other debts. To replace Baker, the chiefs chose Tungi's son, Tuku'aho, to be the new premier. Tired and disappointed, the ageing Taufa'ahau took this appointment passively. Tuku'aho had gone to school at Moulton's Tupou College and he had sympathy for the various positions and viewpoints of the European settlers. However, he was not able to create order in the political, economic and administrative chaos which Baker left behind. To manage these affairs, Thurston sent for the young and dynamic administrator Basil Thomson from Fiji. He managed these affairs with flair: taxes were collected and debts were paid. In 1891 Thomson left Tonga. In 1893, King Taufa'ahau died at the age of about 95.

British intervention in Tongan politics

In the nineteenth century, the mini-state of Tonga was formed following the western model. This model was the social and political construction of a series of mediators between western and Tongan cultures. In this article, we have had a closer look at two of them: the journalist Charles St Julian, and the Methodist missionary Shirley Baker, who became Premier of Tonga. During the formative period of the Tongan state, direct observation by Tongans of western culture was restricted to incidental visits to Australia and New Zealand, which themselves were colonies. Tonga is unique in the South Pacific because it was never colonized. However, this historical 'fact' is misleading to the extent that western powers did intervene in a colonial way in Tongan life. Examples are to be found in religion, which was completely westernized (there were hardly any Tongans who did not refer to themselves as Christians), and in the economy. Commodity production and consumption, with the

accompanying relations of production of wage labour and private ownership of the means of production (mostly land), became increasingly evident. The political domain showed western modelling of kingship, law, and accompanying state government. Moreover, there are many examples of direct intervention in Tongan state government from the outside, when western powers decided that things were going wrong. The deportation of Tonga's Premier Baker in 1890 is an example. And in 1904, another premier, Sateki, was deported from Tonga by a British High Commissioner.

In 1900, a Treaty of Friendship was signed between Tonga and Great Britain. Article 3 of this treaty stated that Great Britain would not intervene in Tonga's internal affairs. But Great Britain did intervene, both before and after 1900. This was legitimized by the so-called corruption of Tongan government and justice, at least from the viewpoint of European settlers and representatives of the British government. Apparently, for the British colonial principle of indirect rule to be successful, some deviant elements had to be eliminated from Tongan government. In the first years of the twentieth century, the British High Commissioner personally put pressure on the new Tongan King, Taufa'ahau Tupou II, to accept the official international status of British protectorate for his country. Clearly, never having been colonized by a foreign political system of government does not imply the absence of 'colonization' by individual persons.

Why has Tonga never been officially colonized? Tonga had a rather small population at the time, about 20,000 people, who lived on dozens of islands spread over an immense area. The distance between the most northern and the most southern inhabited island is 700 kilometres. For a colonial power, it would have required an excessive investment to centralize power in this archipelago. The label 'excessive' takes into account the possible advantages of military and administrative investment. Colonialism has never been a noncommittal matter. Peter Worsley (1964: 44-45) has written:

Colonial regimes [...] were not established as some exercise in 'pure power'. They were erected in order to permit the will of the conquering society to be asserted for specific ends. [...] It is no ideological assertion, but a simple generalization rooted in empirical observation, that the prime content of colonial political rule was economic exploitation (Worsley 1964: 44- 45).

The total land area of Fiji is 27 times larger than Tonga's. At the end of the nineteenth century, Fiji's population was five times the size of Tonga's. Most of the land in Fiji is concentrated on two islands, where most of the people lived. Fiji was annexed as a colony by Great Britain,

and was economically exploited by means of large sugar-cane plantations. In Tonga, the relatively small land area as well as the large distances between the islands did not make such economic exploitation impossible, but it would not have been very lucrative; the costs would have outweighed the advantages. Great Britain was able to secure its own political interests in another way; it was not necessary to annex Tonga as a colony. British political interests consisted of drawing as large a part of the South Pacific as possible within its sphere of influence. What was of importance, in the words of Worsley (1964: 45), was 'control over lines of communication and defence'. The Treaty of Friendship between Tonga and Great Britain in 1900 must be interpreted in this way. The various treaties between the western powers (e.g. in 1899) were of much greater importance for international colonial politics in the South Pacific region than the treaties between the separate colonizing countries and Pacific Island societies. History demonstrates that a Polynesian chieftom state like Tonga was not really taken seriously as an equal partner by Great Britain.

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