

TRADITION VERSUS
DEMOCRACY IN
THE SOUTH PACIFIC
Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa

STEPHANIE LAWSON

*Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
Australian National University*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

To
*James, Richard, Katharine
and Elizabeth*

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1996
First published 1996

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication data

Lawson, Stephanie.
Tradition versus democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji,
Tonga, and Western Samoa
Bibliography.
Includes index.
1. Democracy – Tonga. 2. Democracy – Fiji.
3. Democracy – Western Samoa. 4. Tonga – Politics and
government. 5. Fiji – Politics and government. 6. Western
Samoa – Politics and government. I. Title.
320.496

Library of Congress cataloguing-in-publication data

Lawson, Stephanie.
Tradition versus democracy in the South Pacific: Fiji, Tonga, and
Western Samoa / Stephanie Lawson.
p. cm. – (Cambridge Asia-Pacific studies)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Democracy – Oceania – Case studies. 2. Fiji – Politics and
government. 3. Tonga – Politics and government. 4. Western Samoa –
Politics and government. I. Title. II. Series.
JC423.L373 1996

320.995–dc20

95–32415

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 521 49638 1 Hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2002

Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
Introduction	1
1. Tradition and Democracy	10
The Idea of Tradition	10
Tradition and Modernity	13
Tradition as Ideology	17
The Problem of Authenticity	20
Democracy	26
2. Constitutional Development, Chiefly Power and the Politics of Tradition in Fiji	37
Introduction	37
The Plural Society	42
Colonization and Indirect Rule	44
The Politics of Land and Indigenous Paramountcy	48
Fijian Sociopolitical Structures	53
The Background to the 1970 Constitution	57
The Rise and Fall of Labour	59
The 1990 Constitution	64
Party Politics and Elections in the Republic	70
Conclusion	75
3. The Monarchy Versus Democracy in the Kingdom of Tonga	79
Introduction	79
The Origins of the Political System	81
The Sociopolitical System	84
European Contact and Christian Conversion	88
Constitutional Development	90
The Reign of Queen Salote Tupou III	96
Transformations Under Tupou IV	98

The Pro-Democracy Movement	101
The Conservative Reaction	109
Conclusion	112
4. Preserving Tradition Through Democratization:	
The Introduction of Universal Suffrage in Western Samoa	117
Introduction	117
The Samoan Polity	120
Samoa Before the Coming of Europeans	126
From Contact to Colonial Rule	130
Politics and Law after Independence: The First Twenty Years	138
The Rise of Political Parties and Party Politics	146
The Introduction of Universal Suffrage	148
<i>Fa'aSamoa</i> and <i>Fa'amatai</i>	151
The Village Fono Act of 1990	155
Conclusion	157
5. Conclusion: Tradition Versus the West	160
<i>Notes</i>	175
<i>Bibliography</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	222

Maps

The South Pacific	xii
Fiji	36
Tonga	78
Western Samoa	116

Tables

1. Composition of the Parliament of Fiji 1970–1987	58
2. Ethnic Composition of Governments 1972–1987	59
3. Composition of Parliament under the New Constitution	65
4. Composition of House of Representatives after 1992 Election by Party and Communal Group	71

Introduction

Throughout the Pacific, appeals to a reified concept of tradition, which incorporates such kindred concepts as culture, custom, ethnicity and identity, have been common for some time. These appeals have been used to serve a number of different purposes, depending on the context. Some of the ways in which the concept of tradition has been elevated have been seen as an appropriate and long-overdue response to the negative and racist images of Pacific peoples and their ways of life projected by Western colonialism in the region. One critic of colonialism, and a leading exponent of the romantic approach to traditional culture in the Pacific, stresses the negative aspects of the colonial legacy in these terms:

Pacific islands religions, economic systems and other key elements of culture were either suppressed or destroyed and replaced by European ones. This naturally led to the loss of self-respect and diminishing confidence among the Pacific Islanders, who thus developed a sense of inferiority while the Europeans increasingly became self-righteous, seeing Pacific islands traditions and cultures as primitive and outmoded ... At constitutional independence ... between 1962 and the 1980s, Pacific Islanders ... began to reassert their eroding cultural identities and to reactivate some aspects of their lost or suppressed traditions and cultures in order to discover themselves once more.¹

The images evoked by memories of colonialism in the Pacific, and contemporary responses to it, are comparable to the post-colonial experience elsewhere. In Africa, for example, the reassertion of traditional cultural values vis-à-vis Western values has been evident in a range of developments in the social and political spheres. Ironically, much of the currency of tradition with respect to political institutions and practices was due, at least initially, to colonial systems of indirect rule. These

systems tended to make a virtue of necessity in establishing political order on the basis of what were perceived to be existing hierarchies or methods of political and social organization. Furthermore, the language and forms of colonial administration, combined with the influence of earlier modes of political sociology and anthropology, and then with schools of thought associated with modernization and development, have combined to produce an image of 'tradition' that is construed conceptually in direct opposition to that which is thought to be 'modern' or 'Western', or both. In the Pacific of the 1980s and 1990s there has been a very noticeable growth of 'traditionalism' through which images of the distant, pre-contact, and definitely non-Western past have been evoked in terms of what Callick describes as the ultimate Pacific cliché – 'Paradise Lost'.²

The anti-colonial reaction is said to be part of the ideology behind the 'Pacific Way', a culturally as well as geographically oriented expression of identity that was launched on the international stage by Fiji's former Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, during an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1970.³ In elaborating the purposes of the slogan, Crocombe, in broad agreement with the quotation reproduced above, says that the colonial experience 'left a common unpleasant taste in the mouths of islanders: a common humiliation, a common feeling of deprivation and exploitation'; experiences which promotion of, and identification with, the 'Pacific Way' can help to ameliorate.⁴ Similarly, the notion of a 'Melanesian way' has emerged as another specifically reactive force which, in the words of its foremost proponent, provides a basis for identity such that it is 'unnecessary for [Melanesians] to be perfect Englishmen or Americans'.⁵ In an echo of these sentiments, another islander has argued along more specifically political lines that the 'dictates of a Westminster democracy must not be allowed to typecast our lives so as to require us to aspire to become prototype Englishmen'.⁶

These movements share many similarities with the *négritude* movement which in the Caribbean and, later, in Africa, sought to inspire a regeneration of African values to counter the legacy of oppression and racism left by the colonizers.⁷ Although Aimé Césaire's original idea of *négritude* represented a wholesale rejection of essentialism, the influence of later figures like Léopold Senghor of Senegal is said to have transformed it into 'a backward-looking idealism, a falsely naturalized, consistent African mentality that tends to reinscribe the categories of a romantic, sometimes racist European ethnography'.⁸ For Senghor, *négritude* was the 'cultural heritage, the values and particularly the spirit of Negro-African civilization'.⁹ But it was ahistorical and out of touch with the issues of class struggle that had been central to the anti-colonial movements. Instead, it sought to 'recreate a romanticized African and

Caribbean past which had little basis in social reality'.¹⁰ Said's more general critique of the kind of 'nativism' found in such categories of thinking, exemplified by the idea of *négritude*, is especially pertinent to the present discussion:

[To] accept nativism is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself. To leave the historical world for the metaphysics of essences like *négritude*, Irishness, Islam, or Catholicism is to abandon history for essentializations that have the power to turn human beings against each other; often this abandonment of the secular world has led to a sort of millenarianism if the movement has a mass base, or it has degenerated into small-scale private craziness, or into an unthinking acceptance of stereotypes, myths, animosities, and traditions encouraged by imperialism. Such programmes are hardly what great resistance movements had imagined as their goals.¹¹

The kind of thinking that characterized *négritude* ideas has also pervaded discourses about tradition and cultural identity in the Pacific. Carrier, citing Keesing's characterization of the Pacific rendering of *kastom* as 'an idealized reformulation of indigenous political systems and customary law', suggests that this is a method by which 'alien people' have created an essentialist notion of themselves – 'an ethno-Orientalism'.¹² Elsewhere, Keesing has also suggested that many aspects of these constructions, despite the counter-colonial character of their claims, are themselves derived from Western ideologies. He points to the apparent incorporation of Western structures, categories, and premises of thought in the 'counter-hegemonic' discourse espoused by those who promote idealizations of the pre-contact past.¹³ While it is debatable whether these structures, categories, and premises really are peculiarly or uniquely Western, and have no counterpart in indigenous structures,¹⁴ there is little doubt that a reactive process has been at work that has elevated the value of selected elements of cultural traditions 'as symbols of the contrast between those traditions and western culture'.¹⁵

One reason for drawing this out is to focus attention on the rather obvious dichotomy between 'traditional' and 'Western' ways which is produced in this process and to stress the point that Western values, practices, and institutions are very often a major focus of traditionalist criticisms. But on closer inspection we find that this too can be a very selective process, for not all Western values, institutions, and so forth are targeted in this way. As with cultural traditions themselves, only certain elements of Western ways are subjected to traditionalist critique. Further, and most importantly, there is more than one ideological component of such constructs as 'the Pacific Way' – the liberating ideas and ideals associated with the movement comprise but one aspect. Just as the search

for an authentically African mode of politics resulted in the production of an ideology justifying the authoritarian one-party state in Africa,¹⁶ so too has 'the Pacific Way' been employed at times as an instrument of social and political control by indigenous elites. This becomes evident when we examine more closely the positions occupied by the major proponents of the 'return to tradition' via 'the Pacific Way' – a trend which draws on the past as a source of legitimate political norms for the present and the future. These people have also frequently condemned Western democracy as an unsuitable form of political rule in the South Pacific, especially vis-à-vis pre-existing political systems. It is in this sense that 'tradition' is ranged against 'democracy' in a contest for conceptual or ideological supremacy.

One commentator notes that Mara's articulation of 'the Pacific Way' places a strong emphasis on the virtues of stability, tradition, and by implication, on the value of 'traditional' chiefly rule.¹⁷ And despite much of the rhetoric against colonialism from South Pacific political elites, these same elites have been said not only to lead a life style that mimics that of their former colonial rulers, but also to 'exploit their own people, sometimes even worse than their colonial masters before them'.¹⁸ Another critic has noted the extent to which the 'exaggerated mystique of custom' has been manipulated in a clearly instrumental manner as a means of legitimizing the aspirations and interests of ruling elites. He adds that many Pacific Islanders know this full well, and are not necessarily 'blinded by their own symbolism and rhetoric'. But the people who suffer most from the 'romantic approach' to tradition are the ordinary people of the region.¹⁹

In one of the most incisive attacks on the South Pacific's privileged classes, Hau'ofa has also identified the 'Pacific Way' as an elitist regional identity, sustained by various regional institutions and bureaucracies, which serve as something of a club for the region's political leaders. This elite has itself become increasingly homogenized as a distinct class in its own right. At the same time, its members have become distanced from their own indigenous cultures as well as from the ordinary people of the islands whom they purport to represent:

As part of the process of integration and the emergence of the new society, the ruling classes of the South Pacific are increasingly culturally homogeneous. They speak the same language, which is English ... they share the same ideologies and the same material life-styles, admittedly with local variations due to physical environment and original cultural factors, but the similarities are much more numerous than the differences ...

It is the privileged who can afford to tell the poor to preserve their traditions. But their perceptions of which traits of traditional culture to preserve are increasingly divergent from those of the poor, because in the final analysis it is

the poor who have to live out the traditional culture; the privileged can merely talk about it, and they are in a position to be selective about what traits they use or more correctly urge others to observe; and this is seen increasingly by the poor as part of the ploy by the privileged to secure greater advantages for themselves.²⁰

Hau'ofa draws particular attention to parts of Polynesia where, under aristocratic rulers and certain Christian church traditions, ordinary people are at once urged to be more innovative and entrepreneurial so as to pursue 'development' strategies, while they are also expected to continue to live under the 'dead weight' of other traditions. These traditions are urged on the poor to maintain social stability; 'that is, in order to secure the privileges that [the elite] have gained, not so much as from their involvement in traditional activities, as from their privileged access to resources in the regional economy'. In this situation, Hau'ofa concludes, 'traditions are used by the ruling classes to enforce the new order'.²¹

It will be seen during the course of this study that the traditionalist emphasis on chiefly rule in Fiji, on the monarchy and aristocracy in Tonga and, to a lesser extent, on the *matai* system in Western Samoa – far from promoting a new kind of psychological liberation in the post-colonial era – can be criticized on many of the grounds identified above. It will be argued that the concept of tradition is one of the most important components of an ideological arsenal which has been used to counter the development of more democratic norms of political conduct and organization – norms that threaten the status of many elites in the region. In summary, then, one of the major purposes of the analysis is to demonstrate that the idea of tradition has been deployed not so much in defence of highly prized aspects of unique cultural identities, but in defence of elite power and privilege against growing demands for accountability in government as well as more extensive opportunities for participation by those without traditionally derived political or social status.

It is essential to any critical study of tradition in a political context that the motivations of those who invoke tradition are scrutinized closely. And, although some may grant a privileged status to 'insider' accounts of these issues, there is no reason to believe that these should be immune from external critiques, or that there is only one 'inside' view.²² Furthermore, although 'tradition' and 'modernity' are central components of some of the most important contemporary political discourses, this does not mean, as Robertson and Tamanisau point out, that this should be equated with primacy. This can lead to the construction of the two components as absolute categories occupying the opposing poles of a rigid dichotomy.²³ This dichotomy poses further questions concerning

the problem of cultural relativism. In the past, the notion of cultural relativism was exceptionally valuable in countering racist ideas. It implied that all cultures should be evaluated, not according to the arbitrary values and standards of a single dominant culture (such as our own), but in relation to each culture's own historical and social context.²⁴ In the present context, however, it poses considerable problems for attempts to criticize or evaluate anything that is different from, or outside, the commentator's own cultural milieu. In addition, it tends to reinscribe the essentialist framework.

This analysis takes the position that strong versions of the relativist argument lead to a conceptual as well as an ethical void in which virtually nothing of any critical value can be said. The rejection of relativism, however, does not entail adopting the equally untenable position of absolute universalism, especially with respect to political forms (including Western models of democracy). But it does entail some value judgements and in this respect I can only agree with the view that the true worth of study in the humanities or the social sciences is that it equips people to make value judgements, not to avoid them.²⁵ This is neither a popular nor a 'safe' position, but it will be defended not simply from the perspective of an 'external' supporter of democratic values, but also from the perspective of those in Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa who do not necessarily accept the eternal legitimacy of so-called natural indigenous hierarchies and who have provided the major internal impetus for movements promoting democratization. It is also undertaken in the spirit of criticism now promoted by a growing number of South Pacific writers, many of whom come from the most rigidly authoritarian and hierarchical society in the region – Tonga. The origins of this school of thought in Tonga will be discussed in more detail later, but it is worth noting here some of the broader implications of its project.

The approach of this new generation of indigenous critics is completely different from that of the proponents of the *négritude* style of anti-colonial critique and their successors. Although it affirms the worth of various aspects of indigenous culture, it nonetheless rejects all temptations to romanticization, and takes criticism of indigenous socio-political structures as a starting point for constructing a more positive approach to social, political, and economic problems. The leading exponent of this school in Tonga has said:

I fault Pacific cultures most harshly for not having criticism as part of their social morality. I have always maintained that criticism is a cornerstone of educational morality. And I take freedom, the openness, the toleration of, and the publicity of criticism and controversy to be the crowning achievement of a society's sociopolitical development.²⁶

In the context of Tongan society, another commentator has mounted a critique of traditional socialization with respect to its almost complete suppression of the critical faculty in individuals, as well as its implications for authoritarian domination. He points out, first, that there is no equivalent of the European intellectual tradition in Tonga, and that the process of learning before the introduction of Western education is more correctly termed a socialization process which was highly authoritative, due to the rigid stratification of society.

Consequently, the critical faculty of Tongan minds was undeveloped and enclosed. If it did exist, it did so quietly. The nature of Tongan society greatly contributed to this uncritical mindset of its members. Life without criticism is the life of a servant or slave. In Tonga a critical stance was suppressed and treated as unacceptable, if not rude. However, it can be said that this was an effective form of social control. Here the concept of *faka'apa'apa* [respect] is normally the justification, or in plain terms the cover-ups, given for authoritarian control ... This authoritarianism marks the difference between our intellectual tradition and the European one.²⁷

The same commentator takes issue with representations of the past through oral histories in terms of their propensity, at least in the hands of authoritative elites, to justify present political structures. He says that these oral traditions have become powerful ideologies which have been used, for example, to justify past events such as 'brave Tongan chiefs and warriors invading other islands and subsequently ruling them' as well as 'the rise of the Tu'i Tonga and other kingly lineages'. Above all, their purpose is to fortify the prevailing sociopolitical structure and to maintain the status quo. In this respect, he concludes, most Tongans 'who make historical statements are more likely to be stating political rather than historical facts'.²⁸ As we shall see, much the same can be said about representations of the Fijian and Samoan pasts. It should be added, however, that although these remarks are accurate in many respects, they nonetheless tend to err in the direction of romanticizing (and over-generalizing) European intellectual thought. Intolerance and authoritarianism has long flourished in the West, and European histories are as much disposed towards stating political rather than historical facts as any others.

In considering the 'politics of tradition', particularly in relation to pressures for democratization, it is necessary to examine closely some basic ideas about tradition and traditionalism, and how these relate to political conservatism. The distinction between tradition and traditionalism is especially important because critiques of traditionalism can all too easily give rise to the impression that tradition per se is the target. It is also important to understand the extent to which tradition is an

ineluctable element of all social life, and that it is not simply a residual, inert, and 'primitive' category of belief and behaviour. The first chapter, then, considers the notion of tradition and how it has often been misconstrued as an exclusive property of non-Western societies. This discussion also seeks to emphasize a number of features which are common, at least historically, to both Western and non-Western social and political contexts, but which are often overlooked or implicitly denied in the treatment of Western and non-Western polities, especially when it comes to discussions of the development of democracy in the West. The final section of chapter 1 raises some central concerns which are inevitably engaged in discussions of democracy in non-Western contexts, particularly the problems of relativism – both cultural and conceptual – and the difficulties that these pose for identifying the basic features of democratic political rule.

The three case studies outline some fundamental aspects of the history and sociopolitical traditions of Fiji, Tonga, and Western Samoa respectively, as well as their varying experiences with European imperialism. Although Tonga was never formally colonized, this latter aspect is as important for understanding Tonga's political development as it is for Fiji and Western Samoa. The historical accounts of the pre-contact period need to be understood as representing a synthesis of orthodox versions that are not necessarily accurate reflections of social or political 'realities'. There are no written records of earlier eras and the stories which survive as oral history, and which now make up a substantial part of 'official' histories, represent only very partial accounts. At the same time, I do not want to imply that written histories provide a record of indisputable 'facts'. In whatever genre histories are presented, the search for absolute historical truth 'is just as impossible as seeing into the future'. Furthermore, the narrative voice of the past is in many ways nothing more than the voice of the present, 'grafted onto the pieces of the historical record'.²⁹ Whether or not the accounts presented here are 'real' histories, however, they are nonetheless broadly accepted by members of the societies concerned as legitimate sources of historical, cultural, and political understanding. They therefore provide the necessary background for the discussion of certain political developments in each of the countries, especially as these relate to contemporary issues involving the juxtaposition of tradition and democracy.

In Fiji, the focus is concerned largely with the processes surrounding constitutional development and the role of the traditionalist emphasis on chiefly legitimacy, especially in a plural society. In Tonga, the rise of the Pro-Democracy Movement is considered against the background of an exceptionally conservative political order that has so far resisted all pressures for reform. Unlike Fiji and Tonga, however, Western Samoa has

proceeded further along the path to democratization, although certain restrictions on political participation remain and are unlikely to be removed in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the move to universal suffrage in Western Samoa can in some ways be seen, not as a rejection of tradition in favour of more democratic norms, but as a means of preserving important aspects of traditional culture. In the light of the three case studies, the concluding section reconsiders the issues raised in the initial discussion of tradition and democracy. Although some factors relating to external influences will be raised, the argument stresses the point that pressures favouring democratization in each of the countries are not so much imposed from outside, but come most forcefully from within the societies concerned.