

## Bendable facts: A note on the division of labour in Tonga

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### Introduction

Gender, which entails the sociocultural construction and interpretation of masculinity and femininity, is a fundamental aspect of relations of power, of individual and collective identity, and of the fabric of meaning and value in society (e.g. see Davies & Nadel-Klein 1992). It affects the life, life expectations and social relations of an individual in complex ways, and gender understandings, seen cross-culturally, vary widely. The connected roles often appear as startling or surprising to Western-based notions of what is “natural”.

This article is about an example of gender role patterns that have puzzled scholars for well over a century. It has been generally believed that by the early contact period, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, all heavy work in the Tongan islands — such as agriculture, house-building, and deep-sea fishing — was the responsibility of the men, while the women were mainly restricted to physically lighter tasks such as marine gathering, making barkcloth and weaving mats. The most often quoted statement supporting this notion was made by William Mariner (in Martin 1991[1827]:370–371), and it referred to the period of 1806–1810:

The natives of Fiji, Hamoa [Samoa], and the Sandwich Islands [Hawai'i], who were resident at Tonga used to say that it was not a good practice of the people of the latter place to let their women lead such easy lives, the men, they said, had enough to do in matters of war, &c., and the women ought, therefore, to be made to work hard and till the ground. No, say the Tonga men, it is not *gnale* [*ngali*] *fafine* (consistent with the feminine character) to let them do hard work; women ought only to do what is feminine. Who loves a masculine woman? Besides, men are stronger, and, therefore, it is but proper that they should do the hard labour. It seems to be a peculiar trait in the character of the Tonga people [...] that they do not consign the heaviest cares and burdens of life to the charge of the weaker sex; but, from the most generous motives, take upon themselves all

those laborious or disagreeable tasks which they think inconsistent with the weakness and delicacy of the softer sex.

Mariner's statement contradicts Smith's (1977) argument that the need for maritime people to exploit terrestrial as well as marine resources would result in a greater role differentiation between women and men, and a greater dependency on *women* to control *land*-based food production. Such was, indeed, the case among many coastal peoples in Oceania, where the general pattern of gender roles in pre-European times was that men were bound to defence and war services, voyaging and deep sea fishing, whereas women took care of all household procurements, such as cooking, house furnishing and seafood gathering, and often all or most of the gardening. For human societies in general it has actually been suggested that women *everywhere* — because of their reproductive functions making them more closely associated than men with “nature” and the “domestic” (see Ortner 1974) — gather fuel and food, fetch water, prepare drinks and vegetable foods, and cook, activities which are performed close to the home and involve monotonous tasks that can be easily interrupted and resumed (Brown 1970:1074; Dahlberg 1981:13).

This was, however, as will be argued here, not a pattern that was found in Tonga during the contact period. Elsewhere often “feminine” tasks such as carrying water, getting firewood, cooking and gardening were here the *men's* responsibility. The gender roles in Tonga were, and are still, a complete contrast to the pattern which is generally found in rural Melanesia, where agricultural work is the women's responsibility (Hau'ofa 1979:87).

One of the first facts of life that Tongan children become aware of is that “boys go and girls stay”, and that there is a clear distinction between men's and women's tasks (Morton 1996:ch. 4–5). Generally speaking, boys and men are responsible for work in areas that are considered “outside” — the bush, the open sea, and outside the house — whereas girls and women are responsible for chores “inside” in the sense of being done at home,

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or in the village, the town or the sea area within the reef. What men do is conceptualized as requiring more strength, skill and mobility, while the women's tasks, which are not considered as "work" (*ngāue*) are characterized as light, simple, clean and requiring little or no mobility. Most remarkably, they do not include agriculture apart from, at times, weeding and harvesting.

The question is, however, *how old* this division of labour is. To what extent was Mariner's description correct? Was the whole pattern, in fact, a result of civil war and Christian impact during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

As a contribution to the discussion on gender roles in Oceania, I will present some previously overlooked data on the division of labour in Tonga, with particular reference to agriculture and marine gathering, and argue that Mariner's statement actually *was* correct.

#### Gender roles during the pre-contact period

One could say that since Tonga and its neighbour groups of islands were the first to be settled in Polynesia (e.g. see Kirch 2000), it was there that Polynesian history began. From the initial settlement of the Tongan islands by the Lapita people over three millennia ago and through the different main eras —

including, of course, the period following contact with Europeans, particularly from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century — Tongan culture has always been dynamic, a continually changing complexity. It has been a way of life where perhaps the most basic antithesis of life and thought has been that between land and sea (see Malm 1999). Within the culture area of Fiji–Tonga–Samoa, one finds many interesting similarities as well as contrasts (e.g. see Kaeppler 1978). Among these are gender roles and tenure systems related to food production (Malm 1999, 2001).

How long, then, has gardening solely, or at least mainly, been the responsibility of the men in Tonga? Unfortunately, there is very little archaeological evidence available to allow for any conclusions regarding this issue. Spennemann (1986a-b, 1990) has concluded, though, that although there is no evidence for fishing during the formative period of Tonga — approximately A.D. 200 until 1200 — it can be inferred from a study (Pietrusewsky 1969) on skeletons from two burial mounds at 'Atele, Tongatapu, excavated in 1964 and dated to about A.D. 1200–1500 (Davidson 1969), and also from his own analysis of skeletal material from a Lapita site in Pea on the same island (Spennemann 1985).

In an analysis of the skeletons found at 'Atele, Pietrusewsky (1969:324–325) found that the vertebral columns in the necks of the males showed a



**Figure 1.** Women gathering mussels in a picture made in 1793 by Juan Ravenet, who came to Vava'u, Tonga, with Alejandro Malaspina's Spanish expedition. (Courtesy of Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney; ZDG D2 f10.)

high intensity of osteoarthritis, but that there was almost no arthritis in the lower spine sections. Conversely, the skeletons of the females showed a high percentage of arthritic vertebrae in the lower spine, but no none were found in the lower neck region. Spennemann (1985) was able to document an arthritis pattern in male Lapita skeletal material which was similar to the one documented by Pietrusewsky. He also refers to Houghton (1980), who found evidence in early New Zealand Maori male skeletons of an excessive use of the arm in a strong, forceful motion directed downward and backward. Together with a high percentage of osteoarthritis in the cranial vertebrae of the neck region, this would indicate that the men in question had spent a lot of their time paddling canoes, and Spennemann (1986a-b, 1990) makes the same conclusion for the Tongan male material.

As fishing and canoeing to this very day are mainly masculine activities all over Polynesia, the conclusion regarding the male skeletons is hardly surprising. But how could the women develop arthritis in the lower spine? Frequent bending down when picking seafood and turning over coral rocks in the search could be one answer. This is what we see on the very first drawings made of Tongan women gathering molluscs (Fig. 1 and 2). Spennemann (1990:105) writes that this is something which is mainly being done on the mudflats and

reefs, though, and since the population in question must have lived close to the burial place, situated close to the inner lagoon area (Fanga'uta) but far from the reef, and since 90 per cent of shells found in the vicinity were of lagoonal habitat, it does not seem likely that these people exploited reef resources to any major extent. Gathering in the lagoon and on the mudflats is mainly conducted by searching the ground with the toes while standing up or sitting down in the shallow water and digging with the hands and would not thus result in any arthritic vertebrae, he argues.

For the past 22 years, I have observed — and also participated in — marine gathering in many different parts of Oceania, and I have described the gathering/capture techniques used in Tonga (Malm 1999:166–170). It is, in fact, common to see women squatting or bending down while gathering seaweed or marine invertebrates in the lagoon as well as on the reefs. I have also found old photographs that show this, such as one from the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 3) — at least four among the seafood-gathering women in the lagoon are seen bending down in that one. If the women whose skeletons were described and discussed by Pietruswesky and Spennemann spent a lot of their time picking *non-mollusc* resources, such as seaweed, sea cucumbers or jellyfish — something which we cannot tell from the archaeological evi-



**Figure 2.** A sketch by Juan Ravenet in 1793, showing women of Vava'u bending down to pick molluscs. (Courtesy of Dixon Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney; ZDG D2 f8.)

dence — I would expect this to have put some strain on their backs, because while women are doing this they frequently bend down.

On the other hand, Spennemann (1990:15) concludes that “it was part of the women’s role to work in the garden and to bring the crops home, whereas it was part of the men’s role to go fishing and to engage in long and medium distance trading and war, i.e. in canoeing in general.”

Now, the sample of skeletal material is fairly small, and we do not know how representative it is for the whole Tongan population at the time — and neither can we know, for certain, if the gender role pattern was uniform all over Tonga. In any case, it could be argued that a population living by an *inner* lagoon would hardly be representative of coastal people living along the waterfront with access to the lagoon as well as reef areas. Spennemann’s interpretation would be plausible in the light of the general pattern of Melanesia, though, and that was where the Lapita people had lived before colonizing Western Polynesia.

There is, however, also ethnohistoric evidence that is valuable for understanding how the gender roles might have evolved. Helu (1995:195–196) has argued that the Tongan islands around the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. became centralised and tightly organised under the high chiefs so that there would be less inter-tribal warfare, and he suggests that the Tongan men would then have been “freed up for fresh roles” and the division of labour was thus ready for restructuring. He concludes that in this more peaceful society there was an increasing agricultural emphasis, and all heavy work — including gardening — became the men’s domain of specialised labour, whereas the women were restricted mainly to household chores and to the

production of barkcloth, plaited mats and other items that could be used as wealth objects as well as in daily life.

The restructuring of gender roles, I would add, could then have happened at a time when French Polynesia and the Cook Islands — the eastern dispersal area for Hawai’i, New Zealand and Easter Island — had been settled for at least a few hundred years. That the women on some, but certainly not all, islands there were more involved in agriculture could therefore be interpreted as mirroring the pattern in Tonga before it changed (for comparisons of agricultural systems in Western and Eastern Polynesia, see Barrau 1961; Kirch 1984:ch. 7, 1994).

The fact that a gender role pattern similar to the one in later Tonga is found among some other peoples in or close to Western Polynesia could then, perhaps, be explained by Tongan influence. For example, in the Ono-i-Lau group, a part of Fiji closer to Tongatapu than to the main Fijian islands, there was a considerable Tongan influence. The men there are always praised for the size of their gardens and the women do not get involved in the gardening although (as in Tonga) they do visit the gardens to fetch vegetables (Vuki 1992:47). In Moala, the pattern is also similar to the one in Tonga. Whereas the women there weave mats and make barkcloth, the cultivation of food crops is men’s work (Sahlins 1962). Also, although Samoans were among those who told Mariner that the Tongan women “ought to work hard and till the ground”, it has been stated that agriculture in Samoa was the sole responsibility of the men (e.g., see Hjarnø 1979-1980:82).

It is possible, however, that the supposedly restructured Tongan pattern actually already existed when Eastern Polynesia was colonized.



**Figure 3. Women and children gathering seafood in a Samoan lagoon.**  
This photo was taken by Thomas Andrew, Apia, during the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (From Krämer 1897.)

For example, referring to historical accounts from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries where it is stated that the women in Hawai'i never worked outdoors until they got old but spent most of their time making barkcloth, ornaments and taking care of domestic tasks, Valeri (1985:123) writes:

What holds for the appropriation of taro and fish also holds for the appropriation of other important food. Women are excluded from the production and cooking of these foods, even though at times they may play an indirect role [...] At most, they are given the task of appropriating some secondary foods — which in a way are “residual”, like the women themselves: shellfish, molluscs, seaweed, small crustaceans, and so on. Sometimes they are able to grow sweet potatoes (*'uala*), a little-prized tuber reserved for marginal land [...].

Thus, contrary to what the Hawaiians told Mariner, it appears as if the subsistence gender roles in old Hawai'i were in fact quite similar to those described by him for Tonga.

### Gender roles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Spennemann (1990:107–108) has suggested that the pattern described by Mariner might have been a result of the situation during the civil wars in 1799–1852. During this period a dispersed homestead pattern where people had lived close to their gardens changed into a more nucleated pattern (Kennedy 1958:162–165), and it was also a period of very intense missionary efforts (e.g. see Lätukefu 1974). Spennemann argues that the responsibility for gardening shifted to the men because they were more able to defend themselves against enemies. That Tongans today see this pattern as the traditional one may also, he writes, be a result of a long Christian impact. The church, basing its teaching on paternalistic European ideals, should thus have encouraged and firmly established an emergent pattern which was correct from its own point of view.

There is actually very scanty early historic evidence to support Spennemann's argument, although the civil war and Christianity certainly had a strong impact in many other ways. According to Spennemann (1990:106), Mariner was the *only* early European visitor to Tonga who gave any details on who did the work in the gardens. This is not correct. First of all, we have a statement by James Cook (in Beaglehole 1967,I:176–177) that a high chief had the plantations inspected in order to see “that every *man* cultivated and planted his quota” (emphasis added). More important, though, is the following, which William Anderson

(1967[1777]:932–933), who was surgeon's mate on Cook's third voyage and a keen observer, wrote 12 years before the civil war began and almost 30 years before Mariner arrived in the islands:

The employment of the women is of the easy kind and for the most part such as may be done in the house. The manufacturing [of] their cloth [...] is wholly consign'd to their care, and next to that fabricating their matts seems to be of the greatest consequence [...] There are many other articles of less note that employ their spare time, as combs of which they make vast numbers, little baskets made of the same substance as the matts and others of the fibrous Cocoa nut husk, either plain or interwoven with small beads [...] The province allotted to the men is as might be expected far more laborious and extensive than that of the women. Agriculture, Architecture, Boat building, Fishing and other things that relate to Navigation are the objects of their care.

Anderson's comment (in a journal which was unknown by Mariner and his editor Martin, as it was not published until 1967) that this pattern was what “might be expected” could be taken to reveal that it conformed to his own cultural background. If so, he must have had upper-class women in mind, because ordinary countryside women hardly led such a comfortable life in Europe, but this does not necessarily mean that his statement was erroneous. He goes on to compare the Tongans with peoples living in other places he had been in the Pacific, and who were “in a very barbarious state”. It is here apparent that he had noticed a pattern which was rather different in Tonga. He writes about the Tongan women that “we find them not only eas'd of those laborious employments which their natural delicacy of frame requires, but treated with that respect to which they are often more justly entitled than their lordly masters, and have even a great sway in the management of affairs” (*ibid.*:933).

To contradict Anderson's words about the women's “natural delicacy of frame”, just as when Mariner/Martin used the expression “the weakness and delicacy of the softer sex”, one could add that Tongan women were not believed to be innately weak or in need of being constantly protected by the males, and during the civil war there were even instances of women fighting beside their male relatives and defending forts (Ralston 1990a:111–112, 1990b:76). Anyhow, it is clear that Anderson and Mariner here are reflecting upon what they had observed, and their comments — Eurocentric and androcentric as they may be — do not necessarily make their observations less correct.

Spennemann (1990:107) writes that it is not clear whether the statement made by Mariner, who spent a lot of his time among people of the upper strata, only applied to women of rank. With Anderson we do not have such a problem, because like the other participants in Cook's expedition he did spend time with commoners. A few pages after his just quoted statement, he writes the following, which certainly does not describe an activity in which women of rank can be expected to have participated:

They have also great numbers of pretty small seines, some of which are of a very delicate texture, that they use to catch fish with in the holes on the reefs when the tide ebbs, besides barb'd gigs which they strike some with, each of which are so numerous that shows much of their time is employ'd in that business; *and it is the only thing that can be reckon'd laborious where we find the women are sometimes engag'd*, and where they handle the paddle as dexterously as the men. (Anderson 1967[1777]:940; emphasis added)

We do have a statement from a missionary's wife who wrote in her diary in 1823 that "the most important women will often be the most gifted artists because they don't have to spend so much time in the gardens" (Mary Lawry, in Reeson 1985:180; also quoted by Spennemann 1990:106). Unfortunately, she did not mention *how* much time the other women spent there or what they did. Her statement can therefore hardly be used to contradict the well-founded argument that the men at least had the main responsibility for the agriculture and that the women's involvement in food production was limited to lighter agricultural tasks (if any) and to the marine gathering conducted in what most properly could be called the "coral gardens".

## Conclusion

A remarkable aspect of labour division in Tonga is that men's work includes what is often, especially in Melanesia but also elsewhere in Oceania, a typically feminine task: agriculture. A major question has been how long this has been the case. Pre-contact skeletal material has been interpreted as indicating that it was part of the women's role to work in the gardens and bring home the crops, and that the men were fishing and paddling canoes. According to one hypothesis, the division of labour was restructured when the Tongan islands became centralised and tightly organised under the high chiefs so that inter-tribal strife could be more easily managed. This is quite possible, although a comparative ethnographic perspective and the limited archaeological evidence make it far from certain. The argument that the general pattern now found in Tonga did not emerge until during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a

result of missionary efforts and necessary precautions during the civil war (when it would have been dangerous for women to be out working in the gardens), could however be clearly refuted with reference to accounts from the earlier period of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that gave a picture all in line with later ones.

My conclusion is that the gender role pattern in Tonga can be traced at least to the early contact period, and that it is quite possible it is even more ancient. As I have argued elsewhere (Malm 1999), explanations related to mythology and various customs can be important for understanding how the gender role pattern has been reproduced, but hardly how it originated. Only further comparative ethnographic and archaeological research can throw more light on this issue.

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