The internet and postcolonial politics of representation: pacific traversals
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CHAPTER SIX - A PLAY ON THE ROYAL DEMONS

Introduction

[D]emocracy is a multivalent concept with not only political, but also cultural, ideological, moral and even emotional connotations. In consequence, democracy may have different meanings in different cultural contexts." (van Meijl 1998:391)

I come from a country [Tonga] which, in modern times, has never had a civil society worth speaking of. It has always been very, very weak or non-existent. This has been largely due to the special relationship between the State and culture in Tonga. In our case it has always been: Tonga is the State, Tonga is the Culture i.e. Culture is the Nation. And this is in sharp contrast to the West where the State stands apart from culture (or cultures). (Helu 1999:8)

The internet/www are becoming increasingly implicated in discussions about the present and future of 'liberal democracy' and the process of 'democratisation' 1. The definitional status of 'democracy' notwithstanding, current debates are basically about whether ICTs in general, and the internet/www in particular, can enhance citizens' participation in political decision-making. Do they undermine or contribute to 'civil society' by adding an electronic dimension to the 'public sphere' of political organisation and policy-making (Wilhelm 2000:32-33, Moore 1999, Deibert 2000)? Or are ICTs ultimately a threat to democratic ideals, if not the sovereignty of the nation-state itself? 2. Be that as it may, with each passing local or general election in internetted societies, ICTs are touted as harbingers of radical changes to the meaning, practice, and institutions of participatory and/or consultative democratic politics. It should not escape notice, however, that virtual communities (Shields 1996) and various grassroots groups have been working with the interactive and communicative properties of new(er) ICTs since the early days of the internet/www (Harasisim 1994, Harcourt et al 1999, Deibert 2000). This flurry of electronic political activity, corresponding increments in Social Science research and respective philosophical positions taken on the ICTs-Democracy continuum, intersect with another ongoing concern in (neo)liberal democratic societies. Namely, the endemic apathy of general populaces towards elections, let alone the low credibility rating of many political élites. The all too-close-to-call 2000 US Presidential election threw these criss-crossing issues into sharper relief as the democratic bill of health for the 'Leader of the Free World' was scrutinised, online and offline 3. For a brief interlude, the tables were turned.

All the brouhaha over the 2000 US Presidential election notwithstanding, I would argue that in the (neo)liberal heartlands of the OECD, debates about democracy tout court - any definition's universal legitimacy, everyday meanings and practical efficacy - have become bogged down in arcane legal and academic abstractions on the one hand or squeezed out by the easy-speak of politicians on the other. Political debate has given way to election post-mortems, headlined successes or misfortunes of high-profile politicians as media spaces become the province of key candidates on national television (the USA) or their election campaign architects and 'spin doctors'. A whiff of moral or financial scandal may or may not spic up jaded arguments, live television election coverage and hyped up presenters may or may not succeed in generating excitement, that is if a close election or extenuating circumstances (as in the case of Israel in 2001) do not afford this in themselves. Complacency vies with resignation as exercising the right-to-vote competes with the weather and 50% turnouts are considered extremely good given that only 25% are expected. Meanwhile, daily (political) concerns appear

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2 In terms of political analyses of the fate of the geocentric Westphalian Nation-State, the transnational, footloose nature of ICTs are regarded as "potentially debilitating" at worst (Wilhelm 2000:3) or "problematic" at best (Everard 2000:51).

3 The internet/www became a major site for many tongue-in-cheek commentaries and electronic spoofs whilst academic-based emails and listservs were chockers-block with jokes, satires, and semi-serious offers of help in monitoring the Florida recount from non-western/democratising societies.
to be largely impervious to these 3-5 yearly democratic rituals. In short, whilst 'democracy' may be the *sine qua non* of western political life and ideals, there is little room for complacency. There is even less for assuming a universal - global - consensus about the "cultural, ideological and emotional connotations" (van Meijl 1998:391) of 'ideas of democracy - that is, 'rule by the people'" (Scott-Smith 2000: 1-2). Except, perhaps, that such ideals are "an important part of the modern conception of freedom" (ibid).

With this scepticism in mind, this chapter investigates how these connotations and ideals are (re)articulated in an online scenario. This will be done by reconstructing a specific set of political debates that took place on the Kava Bowl discussion forum between the 'Tongan Diaspora' (Morton 1999) and those still living in the Kingdom of Tonga (for this small island kingdom has limited internet access). These debates encompass several years' worth of intense discussions about the pros and cons of 'democracy' - both as an abstract concept, set of values for the South Pacific Islands generally and as an oppositional political movement in Tonga in particular. The main themes and interlocutors of these heated arguments - and the emergent contours and nuances - speak from, and to a complex sociocultural and post-colonial historical and intellectual context (Ashcroft et al 1998: 186-192). At the same time they provide a timely reminder to 'western' viewers that the meanings, practices and gender-power relations of any sort of democracy are not self-evident. They are representational institutions and practices in-the-making (see Williams 1977: 29 passim).

**Caveats and Precisions**

It should be pointed out straightaway that the aim here is not to arrive at an ultimate definition of democracy - digital or otherwise. Rather, the point is to show some online political debate and agitation in operation, locate key nodes in the particular postcolonial politics of (democratic) representation (Hall 1996a:443) at stake in these debates in order to reflect upon those that 'we' take for granted, yet would fiercely defend. This particular exegesis is linked to debates about ICTs and 'democratisation' even if the discussions themselves are not setting out to make such a point. Neither did they occur in an hermetically sealed (cyber)space for they have many on/offline reference points. This is why other 'spaces of representation and representation[s] of spaces' have been consulted. These entail both online and offline

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4 These threads mostly date from February 1998 to November 1999 which was the period of high-frequency of postings on this topic. The Tongan parliamentary elections being referred to here took place in March 1999.

5 There are political discussions in the Kamehameha Roundtable as well, many revolving around US politics for the mainly US-based participants. Ongoing and recent Samoan political issues also get aired such as the chiefly system of representation versus universal suffrage (see Tcherkezoff 1998, Marsh 1999) and the political assassination of a Samoan politician in 1999. Both Western and American Samoan issues are discussed. Over the year 2000-2001, the Tongan discussions about the role of the Royalty and democratic systems of representation have entered the KR by virtue of the fact that the KB was offline at the time. All over the Pacific Islands, the postcolonial as historical period and diaspora are closely related:

- Our small Pacific Island nations are forever struggling to stay afloat financially. We lack the magnitude of natural resources, industry, skills and infrastructure of the larger Western countries. Our weak economies increasingly cause an inexorable drain on human resources when many see emigration as the only route to personal survival and advancement. Our homelands rely disproportionately on foreign aid, and increasingly on the remittances from Islanders working, or living overseas (Pacific Islands Diaspora). (KBAdmin, 17/06/99).

Initial post in *Discussion Topic #69: making the Homeland Economies More Viable: suggestions?* at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/44351.html. Needless to say, the ongoing French colonial regimes in Kanak (New Caledonia) and Tahiti have been forced to deal with various levels of armed resistance and organised political pressure to grant autonomy, if not ultimate independence. In short, the political map of the South Pacific is extremely complex, muddied by French, US, Japanese and Australasian (nuclear) geo-strategic and economic interests all through the 20th century at least (Fry 1997).


commentaries from within and on the South Pacific, alternative views of history, development, human/indigenous rights from Pacific Island groups who do not take one definition of 'democracy' as read. On the other hand, the US Department of State, Australian Department of Foreign Affairs, and the United Nations in 'official' views posted on the internet/www, present a seemingly unproblematic notion of 'democracy'. Between the online debates, official government and Intergovernmental Organisations' declarations, the thing to remember is that in those moments when people pause, really start to reflect upon accepted wisdoms such as 'cultural integrity', 'human rights', 'identity' (both national and individual) in the light of meanings, theories and practices of 'democracy', emotions run high in any environment.

This chapter has two main sections. The first section will briefly highlight some of the main differences between western (North American for the most part) representations of what is at stake vis-à-vis indigenous Pacific Island ones. This provides a critical focus to the issue of whether the internet/www is/is not a potentially democratic /empowering medium vis-à-vis what is actually going on, being produced and responded to online. The latter (re)articulate the interplay between colonial political systems and indigenous sovereignty movements in former German/British and current French colonies of the South Pacific, and the advent of the internet/www. Both are mutually implicated in an ongoing 'exchange of meanings' about not only democracy but also human / indigenous rights (Helu 1999: 32 passim, Wood 1997). The point of this section is to situate the reconstruction of the online discussions in the "ambivalent attitudes towards democracy" (Tarte 2000: 5) in the postcolonial South Pacific, and its diasporic peoples yet without recourse to either 'orientalist' romanticising of indigenous 'tradition' or reification of western (neo)liberal political economic values. To clarify one point straightaway; the working assumptions about democratic/political change being articulated in these online discussions are both linked to and counteract established in/formal political forums and institutions in the Pacific Islands. In Samoa, Fiji, and in this case, Tonga, these partly stem from old and new(er) forms of the Kava ceremonies (Helu 1999:5) let alone longstanding, 'pre-contact' sociocultural and political practices (see Wassmann et al 1998). Once transported into diasporic contexts and/or the internet/www, communicative hierarchies, rituals and their gender-power relations of participation shift and recalibrate in turn.

The second section covers the contours and nuances of the discussion threads themselves. Although self-contained ongoing debates in a longstanding online community and offering a wealth of information on one level, the various positions taken, the semantic and historical disagreements that occur, the passion, impatience and intolerance that gets acted out (see Turkle 1996) should be seen as a complex of political, social and cultural identifications, discourses and (cyber)spatial practices that are embedded in, although distinct from those in the Pacific Islands or elsewhere. Whatever one's own position on the rights and wrongs of

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8 Other points of view were provided by email/face-to-face interactions between myself and interested parties. My thanks go to HRH Prince Tupouto'a, Justin Kaitapu, Futa Helu, Jack Snow, Heather [Evans] and Mike Evans for their invaluable advice to me whilst I was visiting Tonga, and input into this chapter.

9 Of course, how 'indigenous' the point of view of a 2nd generation Tongan or Samoan growing up in Utah or Los Angeles is/is not, is grist to the mill of these debates where diasporic Pacific Islanders and their interlocutors posting from the islands contest each other's legitimacy openly. The relationship - historical, economic and political - is complex to say the least. For instance:

I am NOT a U.S. citizen. I still proudly hold my Tongan passport and will continue to do so. While I am a staunch liberal Democrat here in the States, I also understand that Tonga is a completely different setting, with historical circumstances contrasting to the United States. Thus, whatever liberal views I may have here, may not be so right in the Kingdom. As for any so-called motivation to preserve my own sanctity in Tonga, I'm afraid that is simply not so because I do NOT live in Tonga despite my citizenship. Hence, I cannot BENEFIT from whatever I am espousing about the Kingdom. (Meilakepa, 12/02/99)


10 This is the main argument of Lawson (in Tarte 2000). See Ling (2001) and Ashcroft, Griffith & Tiffn (1998: 167-169)

11 To reiterate briefly. Kava is the mildly narcotic beverage around which kava circles and ceremonies are based (see Helu 1999:5). It is used throughout Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. [See photos - women's participation]
monarchies may be \(^{12}\), these online debates show one ideal of democracy in operation; bottom-up communicative practices-in-the-making. Whilst these debates have their own historical resonances and operate along particular gender-power relations (see Ortner 1996: 59 passim), they still remind the reader (online and here) that nothing about democracy - as everyday political practice, discourse or institution - is self-evident. Least of all in this global capitalising 'democratic' day and age (Hirschkop 1998).

**(Neo)Liberal Democratic Values and Indigenous/Human Rights**

As a leader in promoting democracy and human rights around the world, the United States [has] played an essential and catalyzing role in the process of creating transnational human rights networks .... to support democracy worldwide and promote the standards embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (US Dept. of State 1999:1/25)

Representation for us occurs only down here, at the taro roots, and not through some distant body. What others call the coconut wireless is our highly evolved networking process which we are now enhancing with power tools. We have so much *mana'o* (info and opinion) to share... This is our social capital with which we intend to rebuild our self-reliant communities. We *malama'aina* (care for our island) because it is our heritage. We resist sprawl development because it is our *kuleana* (responsibility). We promote responsible tourism because it is our vision. (Ho'okipa Network 2000)

In the more dismissive responses to the question of 'whither democracy in the light of ICTs', deep "cultural, ideological, moral, emotional" issues are barely broached. For instance; how do electoral systems, political decision-making processes, gender-power relations of political participation and daily governance relate to sociocultural identity and accepted historical wisdom (Helu 1999a, 1999c, Friedman 1998, van Meijl 1998)? Where and how do any changes to the status quo relate to sociocultural identity and/or survival or legitimacy of the historical record? Concerns only really get expressed when major constitutional changes are in the offing \(^{13}\). If not, then it is business as usual for the export of western 'democratic values'. Political corruption, repression, election day 'irregularities' or mismanagement, are seen to reside in 'other' political cultures; in decolonised Africa post-1960's, the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, China and so on. Any doubts about the liberal (democratic) principles that (should) apply in such a setting, about the political economic practices, hierarchies and cultural assumptions underpinning them are not to be entertained for long. Democracy - as defined by the USA more often than not - is a universal human right (US Department of State 1999). For non-western political economies - pluralist, single-party, autocratic, theocratic - such rights have their own, not always welcome, implications (Dai 2000, Mandaville forthcoming). As for postcolonial societies with an inherited western political system these rights are perceived and articulated differently in diaspora, exile, or at-home. The same goes for how agitation for change is tolerated, countered, repressed, or even ignored both on the ground or online - the vagaries of access notwithstanding.

Hence, a brief discursive and philosophical pit-stop needs to be made at some of the West's own assumptions around democracy vis-à-vis how these are disputed in former colonies.

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\(^{12}\) For the record, I am not a monarchist. As an expatriate New Zealander living in the European Union, my own emotional buttons usually get pushed when arriving in the British Isles and being treated as an 'other' even though the British Union Jack is still on the New Zealand flag. This, for me, is a sign of antiquated colonial links that are best severed especially given the new European political construction of identity. My own British ancestry does not change this view. As for representative democracy, my rather jaded attitude to democratic participation was lifted when New Zealand scrapped the Westminster 'first-past-the-post' electoral system in the mid 1990's and instigated a form of proportional representation. By all accounts, elections and political life have become a lot more interesting and one's vote counts again.

\(^{13}\) For instance, changes from a 'Westminster system' to Proportional Representation (New Zealand), the briefly mooted amendments to the US Constitution in late 2000, post-Apartheid elections in South Africa, the future role of the British monarchy after the death of Princess Diana and the eventual declaration of a republic in Australia.
Seeing as it is the highly interconnected societies and 'private sectors' of the former that are currently calling the shots in the global political economy, development trajectories (UNDP 1999, South Pacific Forum 1998), foreign direct investment and R&D into ICTs (McChesney et al 1998), 14 these assumptions and the policy strategies (political economic and social) which they underpin do tend to dominate cross-cultural discourse and policy-making. In political and economic debates in the South Pacific Islands, all interested parties (online and offline) draw upon or counter the international legal longevity and legitimacy, or lack thereof, of such assumptions. They also make use of the 'coutures' in the fabric of these broader strategies which are part of the needlework of historical (colonial), political economic (capitalist) and ethical (liberal individualism) commitments to a certain reading of democracy. Broadly speaking, the first encompasses the modern colonial period to present-day global economic and technological interdependency (US Dept of State 1999:1/25), the second designates the normative and material territory of neoliberal economic theory and policy (Gill 1999), 15 and the third is codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1998, see Helu 1999a, Ignatieff 1999). All these have come to be unproblematically represented as inseparable components of the latest economic globalisation package. Although such reductions come easily since the end of the Cold War and the triumphant 'end of history' celebrated by Fukuyama (see Ling 2001a) that this inaugurated, counter claims for Indigenous Rights, and postcolonial Sovereignty Movements put these coutures, the cultural and economic assumptions woven into them and their makers to task. 16

Looking at it from the other side of the looking glass, so to speak, one sees that whilst seeming to be 'common sense', western-based political self-representations are just as socially and historically contested as those cherished by other political and social systems and societies. Nevertheless, the former assume the moral higher ground and assert it concretely as well as symbolically. This is hardly surprising given the dominance of liberal democratic political economies in intergovernmental institutions like the UN, IMF, WTO and the World Bank, and the military and financial commitment to the post-World War II Liberal Economic Order (Kegley & Wittkopf 1999) and the more recent 'New World Order' (Stubbs & Underhill 1999). But since the 1980's this embeddedness has entailed the proselytising economic orthodoxy of neoliberalism 17 coupled with the marketing of an inexorable historical dynamic called 'globalisation' and supported by the techno-economic (Castells 1996) and military weight of the United States and NATO Alliance. The early and later political economic strategic history of ICTs are bound up in these dynamics as well. Nevertheless, grassroots informal, bottom-up tactical uses and applications - following de Certeau's schema - of the internet/www are an important, and sometimes underground (Rupert 2000) part of contesting the inevitability of any new world 'order of things' (see Foucault 1973).

What should not be overlooked, though, is how the coupling of an historical juncture, the end of the Cold War, and an ideological strategy, neoliberalism, is being taken as self-evident 18. In other words, the economic and social exigencies of ensuring the unfettered operation of 'market forces' are represented as inseparable from 'democracy'. In a preamble to the first of the two quotes above, this unproblematic coupling is clearly assumed:

Today, all the talk is of globalization. But far too often, both its advocates and its critics have portrayed globalization as an exclusively economic and technological phenomenon. In fact, in the new millennium, there are at least three universal

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14 Japan has a significant FDI presence in the South Pacific Islands, Hawaii notwithstanding. The Asian Development Bank has also been active in providing Tonga with computers.

15 Ingenuously summed up by the US Department of State as two 'universal languages' of "money and the internet" (1998:1/25)

16 For example; democracy whilst presented as a "fundamental human right in itself and ... a means to greater protection for a wide range of human rights" (US Dept of State 1999:4/25), is necessarily and morally linked to both military and corporate intervention in the affairs of others (op cit: 2-5/25). For another take on this, see the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (www.hookele.com/netwarriors.dec-En.html)

17 In short, where business prerogatives and/or market forces are seen to be the ultimate regulators and arbiters of political, economic and, by extrapolation, social well-being.

"languages:" money, the Internet, and democracy and human rights. An overlooked "third globalization"—the rise of transnational human rights networks of both public and private actors—has helped develop what may over time become an international civil society capable of working with governments, international institutions, and multinational corporations to promote both democracy and the standards embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (US Dept. of State, op cit, emphasis added)

This formulation shows how the interactive and participatory potential of new(er) ICTs are being subsumed - and redesigned - under this globalisation rubric (Mansell & Silverstone 1996). The upshot is that in this neoliberal order (Cox 1992, 1999), foreign direct investment and internet/www R & D come with stringent structural adjustment packages, if they come at all (World Bank 1998, South Pacific Forum 1998, Laux 1999). Democracy is the moral catch-cry that rationalises these criteria. Meanwhile, at the bottom end of this discursive developmental teleology (see Rist 1997), 'traditional' and 'loose' community and neighbourhood interest-based networks are seen to be inevitably "moving toward a global network of government officials, activists, thinkers 19, and practitioners who share a common commitment to democracy, the universality of human rights, and respect for the rule of law" (op cit: 2/25) under the "important driving forces" of "global telecommunications and commercial networks" (ibid). All the way through such policy/mission statements, multinational corporations are presented as a benign, and necessary other half of "transnational public-private networks" (4-5/25). 'There is no alternative' and the internet/www is simply represented as a means to an end.

But what happens to this latest magic development/modernisation formula (Rist 1997), what is thrown into relief when doubts, reservations and at times outright suspicion of western liberal values and traditional western political and economic systems get aired, either by incumbent regimes or their local opposition? What emerges when these are re-articulated, by way of the aforementioned 'global telecommunications and commercial networks', in online forums not overtly controlled by the approved political or corporate watchdogs? What are the contours and nuances of such debates about "democracy, the universality of human rights, and respect for the rule of law" when they involve a postcolonial society and its diaspora, when they impinge upon a non-western sociocultural context and history, and are generated to boot by a mixture of protagonists living in the west (USA, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere) and 'back home' (in this case, the South Pacific Islands)? Furthermore, under present neoliberal economic norms what is at stake when these - and their connection to liberal individualism - are construed as a continuation of western-style colonialisation, albeit in another form? Or, as debates turn to how all this relates to 'self-determination', what happens to the assumed benefits of 'democracy', 'capitalist entrepreneurship, "private sector expansion" and "reform" (AUSTEO 1997:1/3)? To further complicate things, when issues of human/indigenous rights, political representation, and political economic well-being (read; stability) are all at stake, where does a recourse to 'traditional values' and cultural survival (see Helu 1999b, Wendt 1999) fit into any defence of the status quo or agitation for political change (see Tarte 2000)?

All the above questionings pervade the online political debates examined here, both as specific issues in their own right, depending on how any thread develops as people post, counter-post, or diverge from the initial topic, and also as part of an ongoing debate in the South Pacific Islands about the future of small island states in a 'globalising' and postcolonial age. For indigenous sovereignty activists and their sympathisers, a key issue is that of indigenous rights, of self-determination 20, in the historical context of transplanted colonial political systems and overlapping modes of production that are both 'pre-capitalist' and capitalist at the same time 21.

19 read: professional lobbyists
20 see Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Article 3, 21 (op cit)
21 This is an enormous debate in economic and cultural anthropology. Suffice it to say that wealth creation and distribution in the postcolonial and ostensibly 'capitalist' Pacific Islands still work along extended family lines (kainga in Tongan and aiga in Samoan), hierarchical bilateral obligations, hereditary and androcentric rights to land tenure (Helu 1999:34, Morton 1996) and since the 1960's on remittances (monetary and in-kind) between the islands and its diasporic communities abroad (Ward 1999, Chapman 1985). At the same time, neoliberal structural adjustment programmes have been enforcing stringency measures on governments who are still enormously dependent on direct Aid.
This is not the place to launch into the complex legalities and ethics of indigenous rights as particular inalienable rights vis-à-vis the UDHR as a set of universal inalienable rights. Suffice it to say that the two documents and positions, when taken to their logical conclusions, do not always see eye-to-eye even as they are co-referents. These eminently troublesome practicalities (as in the case of Fiji for instance) and how they are operationalised and articulated constitute the ethical and philosophical backdrop to debates that are dealing with post/colonial and interstitial diasporic histories and experiences (see Ling 2001a). Assumptions, experiences and beliefs about what constitutes 'identity' and 'authenticity' get articulated during the course of these political - and other - discussions (Chapter Seven). So whilst the term 'indigenous' is not on the main agenda of these online interactions between, for the most part Tongan nationals, the notion of what it is 'to be Tongan', how Tonga is to be defined in the last instance (Helu 1999a:8) most certainly is up for debate. Nor is neoliberal capitalism often an explicit discussion point. Yet, for many of the diasporic participants, what is 'Tonga', what makes it unique in their eyes, can not be separated either from the indigenous political economy nor the Royal Family and Nobility - 'warts and all'. For others, the latter are not above criticism:

I agree with you that most Tongans may want some form of democracy. However, I am certain that most Tongans, especially those in Tonga, also want to maintain the power of the Royal family. Is that an oxymoron? No. Simply a call for greater popular representation in the Government but NOT at the expense of our royal institution that makes our Kingdom so unique. For contrary to what you say, we Tongans are not the same as other groups in the Pacific. (Phil Tukia, 18/09/98)

And for others 'authenticity' is an historical construction anyway:

So say what you will, you can not assert that the status quo represents some sort of authentic Tongan tradition passed down from when the first canoes arrived millenia ago. Change has occurred throughout Tongan history. Tupou I was a great leader precisely because he did recognize the 'historical moment', and introduced changes which allowed the country to survive for over another century. It may well be that further changes are needed now. (George Candler, 9/03/99)

In any case, arguments about cultural 'authenticity', the historical record and their concomitant

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22 For example; compare Articles 31 -34 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the UDHR article 1-2. This is Helu's point (1999:32-35). It becomes further complicated when gender issues - particularly concerning women - are broached. Feminists (see Nicholson 1997, Peterson & Runyan 1999) are not necessarily in agreement about what the main issues are nor their practical outcomes.

23 It does come into the discussion whenever Fiji's recurring political unrest (1989, 1998, 2000) is raised, although it remains an open-ended question. For instance, when the following question was put; "...should Tonga be in support of the democratic rights of the Indian immigrants, or in support of the rights of the indigenous Fijians to control their native land...?" (KBAdmin, 15/02/98, initial post in Weekly Discussion Topic #28: Tongan Foreign Policy...An Opinion about Fiji? no longer on server). One regular astutely noted in the ensuing discussion;

The muted response from neighbouring Pacific states when this took place was instructional on a number of levels. When forced to choose between "human rights" issues over "indigenous rights", Pacific nations went for the latter. (Seita, 16/02/98)

DISAPPOINTED in reply to: 1987 - NOW ?????????????????? posted by disappointed, 16/02/98.

It bears noting that 'indigenous' is taken by activists to be as much a cultural designation as it is (arguably) a 'racial' or ethnic one (see UN Press Release 2000, GA/SIC/3595:1/6).

24 One major exception is to be found in a thread entitled A Play on the Royal Demons (initial post by Falani Maka, 3/06/99) where the difference between capitalism(s) and socialism and how either relate to Tonga figured prominently. The initial post was an attempt at mediation between "Pro-Royalists' and 'Anti-Royalists'. See http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/ko/messages/43709.html

25 Democracy and King, in reply to Hold YOUR horses there expert..., posted by George Candler (12/09/98) in Weekly Discussion Topic #5: Democracy for Tonga: Pro or Con? (no longer on server)

26 Sione Latukefu on this issue, in reply to: A Royalist, I Remain posted by Sandy Mackintosh (8/03/99) in We, The People of Tonga thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/ko/messages/10263.html
Identity politics are emotionally charged and deeply politicised.

Where did you get your culture from? First the king and "nobles" taught the commoners to BOW to them. When the palangis with Christianity came to your shore, you added biblical teachings to your culture. I guess you don't know that. (Onetongan, 8/06/99) 27

To sum up briefly. These complex issues are part and parcel of the political fabric of any postcolonial society that is under pressure to structurally adjust, create exports for global markets, cope with the balance of payments and ingrained forms of economic dependency, and also for its diasporic groups. Amidst all these particularities there are effectively two broad historical and technical pressures at work; western liberal democracy tout court and that of ICTs - the internet/www. Everyday life online, as practised in discussion groups, newsgroups, live chat sites and so on, the virtual communities they are part of do impinge upon how these pressures, their particular histories, and their interaction unfurl. Furthermore, online communities that originate from (non)western societies and are populated by their diasporas (Mandaville forthcoming, Miller & Slater 2000) articulate different perceptions and experiences of what constitutes (democratic) politics on the one hand, and non-elite uses of the internet/www on the other. These distinctions are not always given their due in literature and research on the political (democratic) efficacy of ICTs per se. Meanwhile, the obfuscations and conflations between privatisation/commercial rights and individual-social-national ones, between political and commercial freedoms, between human rights and moralistic military intervention, 'civilisation' and capitalism (see Cox 1999), evident in the 'mission statements' of contemporary champions of (neo)liberalism are not taken as read in postcolonial scenarios. And least of in these online ones. But neither are the accepted wisdoms and practices of the Tongan/Polynesian/South Pacific status quo.

With these inter-subjective complexities in mind, it is time the online discussions and their creators spoke for themselves.

Pro-Change versus the Status Quo: Contours and Nuances 28

What many people don't realise is that democracy is ...presented as something that appeals to the eye and people are deceived into thinking it's some great thing, but it's a deadly weapon against a people of strong indigenous backgrounds ... I understand that many of those running the government are corrupt and it saddens me that Tonga has lost its glory days, but it could be much worse. Had not Tupou 1 (a royal) did what he did, you can bet your bottom dollar that Tonga would be run by palangis [westerners] and the Tongan people would be like other Polynesian people who would be homeless in their own land.... (Manu Lobendahn, 13/05/99) 29

I believe that we will never be put in a situation like [the above] IF, and the emphasis is on the world 30 IF - we give the power to the people (true democracy). The system will correct itself with its checks and balances. The present form of government lacks that unfortunately.... Our situation is DIFFERENT [to Hawaii]... The people who support

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27 in reply to Re: ROYAL IDEOLOGY posted by maileatevolo (8/06/99) in Royal Ideology thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/43999.html
28 Initial Posts related to the Tongan Royalty and/or Pro-Democracy issues provide the highest follow-up totals of the threads gathered between 1996 - 2001: 118 (Longest Serving Rulers) and 221 (Weekly Discussion Topic #27: Adherence to Chiefly and Royal Successions). The mean response rate was about 23-25 in this category. If a reasonable response rate at any time could be set at 10-15 follow-ups and a good response rate at 20-30, then the predominance of political content in those over 30 and up to 80 is significant. See Appendices Three and Four.
29 in reply to NO DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN TONGA, I HOPE NOT! initial post by NINJA (12/05/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42558.html
30 Once again, these interventions have been reproduced in their 'raw' state. I shall only intervene editorially where absolutely necessary or when non-English phrases are used. The reader, in this 'offline' format, needs to see/receive/digest these spoken-written texts as they appear on screen, if for no other reason than to experience their multifarious nature (and their phonetic, oral oratory qualities).
the democratic movement is [sic] as Tongan as those opposing it. They love the country and the people just as much as those opposing the movement...... you're assuming that we'll replace our Custom and our Culture with Democratic rights. That assumption is wrong, of course, because ....these rights are weaved into the fabric of our society, it identifies who we are as human beings, and true democracy will only bring out the best in it...the rights of the people, that is at the centre of the Democratic Movement. The people's (me'availe) rights have been oppressed (for lack of a better word) continuously throughout the years by the Hou'eikis [chiefs] and the Ma'u Mafai [Ministers of the Crown]. (Tokoni Mai, in reply to Manu, 16/05/99) 31

These two selections encapsulate the main themes of these threads' immediate subject matter and their offline reference points. Reconstructing and understanding this debate is particularly complex for several reasons. First, the historical issues and their sociocultural and political economic aspects cannot be neatly separated out, either online or on the ground. To do so would result in unravelling interwoven debates to such an extent that they would cease to have any sense as an organic and ongoing conversation in their own right and as part of a host of other conversations. This practical issue of reconstruction-interpretation is related to the second complicating factor. The main recurring themes of the ostensible content are spliced with at least two other 'hermeneutic' nuances - situated experience and inter/subjectivity. These crisscross and are infected by many other threads, events, and interventions, both on and offline 32. The protagonists and their (self)designations are part and parcel of how the threads evolve, switch back, turn in upon themselves. The person - her views and identifications - are food for debate as much as the views they put forward 33. So are the respective perceptions-experiences-social positions they draw upon to make a point, retort or refer to other forms of authority and so forth.

Contours

Recalling the pit-stop made earlier, the relationship between democracy, human/indigenous rights, and change (however any of these are defined) in the Tongan-South Pacific context provide an important point of entry into the threads; both physically and analytically 34. The aforementioned concepts, the institutions and histories they carry, are effectively what is in dispute. So are their sociocultural implications for non-western peoples; whether these be seen as part of the strategic cultural arsenal of neo-colonialism, inapplicable to other political traditions, fungible, or of limited applicability 35. Significant nuances emerge, however, when the same content is looked at from the angle of who the protagonists are, who they identify with on the one hand and what - where - their situated experiences are on the other. The messages that comprise the threads articulate the protagonists themselves - their gender, nationality-locality, race-ethnicity, the official positions they espouse during the course of the discussions, and the 'moral and emotional' investments that are at stake. Furthermore, they express and reflect some of the specific (online) moral economies that belong to these communities (Chapter Eight).

31 Re: THANKS FOR GIVING US THE OTHER SIDE, BUT ... in reply to Re: GIVE US THE OTHER SIDE!/ posted by Mapatongiamanu, 15/05/99, in NO DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN TONGA, I HOPE NOT! thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42657.html
32 The threads here are permeated first and foremost with offline concerns and histories - what is happening 'back home' in Tonga rather than being structured by the condition of being 'purely' online (Jordan 1999, Jones 1999).
33 This is not to say that this dynamic does not descend into ad hominem reasoning and degrees of flaming. It does and there is plenty in any of the more heated arguments (much of this gets deleted by the online moderators). After all, many participants know each other more or less - online, from school (one regular - Sandy - interacts with some of his former pupils) and through social networks such as Churches.
34 It bears repeating that hypertext and the asynchronicity of 'Bulletin Board' software allows for lateral access and linking.
35 See the aptly entitled original posts, A Play on the Royal Demons, Royal Ideology, Solution for Tongan Legislative Assembly; Let the People Elect Representatives of the Nobles!, The Dominant Ideology in Tongan Society.
There are four discernable contours to the online landscape of issues and the respective horizons of the positions taken. Change, what it entails and what its implications are, operates as both sub-text and meta-narrative to these debates. In this sense, 'democracy' operates as a synonym for various degrees of change in these discussions and its meaning - practical, institutional, sociocultural and gendered - shifts accordingly. Whether Tongan society is to be defined as 'democratic' per se is as much of an issue as whether the way it is currently operating is or not. A fine line perhaps for onlookers but an important one nonetheless for participants. Cynics might suggest that such semantics reflect online indulgences in long-distance nationalism or even clever political rhetoric in discussions of a politically and socially sensitive topic in a world-wide public (cyber)space. Be that as it may, the passion, eloquence, and, at times, dogmatic reiterations of position show a high degree of emotional and intellectual commitment to the issues at hand. The length and tenacity of the threads also indicate a large degree of persistence, and then re-consideration on the basis of others' arguments. For a society that is often noted for its reticence in expressing political criticism publicly, these online articulations show a relatively overt outspokenness. At the very least, opinions are being aired and by those (women and those not from the political elite) who do not have the structural right-to-speak in formal Tongan political forums (see below). Hence the extensive use of optional anonymity (Dai 2000) which brings with it both protection and opportunities for agitation. A number of key participants, men and women, do go by their own names nevertheless. I will return to this point later on.

The first of these contours is the integrity and future legitimacy of the incumbent monarch and his family. The monarchy's power is encoded in a written constitution and chiefly privileges, whereby the Royal Family and the nobility effectively control - and own - Tonga's political economic life. This arises because Tonga's constitutional monarchy dating from the mid-19th century is intertwined with an 'hierarchical' social order (see Ortner 1996, Helu 1999, Morton 1996). The upshot of a particular set of historical events in the 19th century saw the consolidation of the power of one Chief/King (Tu'i Tonga) who appoints key ministers from the Tongan nobility (hou'eitki). Together they have executive power in that they dominate the cabinet, the legislative assembly and judiciary, limited representation in the parliament for 'commoners' notwithstanding. In this respect, a modern representative democracy is mixed with executive powers that hark back to both European ancien régime and Polynesian chiefly ranks and status (Helu 1999b, 1999d: 195-196).

King Tupou IV has been in power since 1965. The Kingdom of Tonga is regarded by its internal and expatriate critics and other observers as an 'absolutist' or 'feudal' monarchy, even a theocracy (van Meijl 1998:389), that exploits its power and sociocultural legitimacy through an

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36 Both the pros' and con's in any of the debates were fairly evenly represented, by any method of counting and incorporating nicknames and multiple 'handles'. The same applied to (explicitly or self-identified) men and women.  
37 For example, the large thread - Royal Ideology - actually conforms to the very criteria said to be lacking in online deliberations (see Wilhelm 2000:32-34, 138-143); namely evidence of ongoing social interactions and recognition, shifts in argument and position, facilitation that is, "related to weaving the right to reply into the fabric of conversation and to negotiating difference... that would add a new facet to the prism of public opinion..." (Wilhelm 2000:141).  
38 ...there are a handful of social and political inducements to staying silent in public about this matter, i see no problem with people voicing their concerns here, there, in any matter... it isn't the speaker who is important, it is the truth they are trying to discover... only those fearing the truth, need to stop the speaker..." (voiceless, 8/06/99)  
30 The Constitution of 1875 cemented the role of (by now Christian) King George Tupou I over rival chiefs and nobles, codified indigenous male rights to land tenure, installed a Bill of Rights, legislative and judicial procedures. A mutually exclusive social hierarchy remains whereby the Royal Family and 33 hereditary nobles are the aristocracy and the rest are commoners (Swaney 1994). These divisions are reproduced in language and social obligations (Helu 1999c: 32-36)  
40 The King and a cabinet of 12 nobles preside over a Legislative Assembly which is divided up into 9 nobles and 9 people's Representatives (Commoners).
'élitist' and/or 'class' society. In the Kava Bowl Discussions, whether instigated from the constituency (agitating for or against change) or the moderators, what are called 'Pro-Democracy' supporters debate heatedly with Royalists, Palangis and others living in, or from other South Pacific Islands - Samoa and Hawaii in particular - contribute their views on the Tongan situation. Diasporic participants interact with at-home participants, expatriate government critics like Kalafi Moala and the occasional politician like William Afeaki joining in at various moments. Tonga vis-à-vis the rest of the world, its specificity and/or its similarity to other postcolonial island countries weaves its own thread through these interventions (some posted from Hawaii where there is a strong indigenous sovereignty movement). In short, fierce loyalty to the current dynasty and its co-dependent nobles vie with calls for increased participation by commoners in a more fully inclusive legislature, if not 'civil society' (see Helu 1999a:8). For example:

Why don't you mind you own bloomin' business. Tonga is run by the King and it will stay that way doesn't matter what. Who do you think you are? What have you done for Tonga? The King and the nobles did a lot for Tonga. than you and I put together. So leave Tonga's legislative assembly as it is. History will speak for itself. (Vai ko Hiva, 28/08/99)

So let me ask you some more questions:- Do you believe in democracy and if so, how do you define this democracy ?. Do you believe in equality and do you separate social equality from political equality?. Justify the contrast in living standards between the common people and the Nobility in Tonga?. These are just some of the questions you as a Tongan need to ask yourself. Proud to be Tongan! (Ghost, 3/03/99)

According to the latter, more inclusive understanding of democracy and despite all protests to the contrary or appeals to the constitution, Tonga is not a democracy simply because it appears that there are 2 set of rules in Tonga. One for the King and his 'nobles' and one for the people of Tonga (OneTongan, 8/06/99)

Pro-Royalists are clear in what it is they will not countenance.

TONGA HAS IT'S MONARCH, AND SHOULD REMAIN THAT WAY .... SORRY BUT THAT DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT OR WHATEVER, WILL ONLY DESTROY OUR LITTLE PIECEFUL KINGDOM THAT WE NOW CALL "HOME". (NINJA, 17/05/99)

Dream on. Your pro-Western wishes need a wash in the nearest laundramat. Tonga is a Constitutional Monarchy, if you don't already know. The King does not own anyone;

41 This last characterisation is one of many on the discussion forums (Harrieta Tubman, 10/03/99, in reply to The King Is Expanding his home in San Mateo county but how about us? posted by Homeless Tongan, 9/01/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10346.html
42 Three out of over 70 'Weekly Discussion Topics' (#27, 51, 71) initiated by the Kava Bowl administration (namely Sandy Macintosh by his own admission) were about the monarchy/democracy issue. Most of the political debates were initiated by this forum's online 'grassroots' constituency.
43 See for instance Weekly Discussion Topic #51: Democracy in Tonga: Pro or Con?? (7/09/98, KB, no longer on server)
44 in reply to RE: Solution for Tongan Legislative Assembly....Let the People Elect Representatives of the Nobles! posted by laomoehiamamafa (28/08/99) at http://www.pacificforum.com/kavabowl/tonga/messages/6156.html.
46 In reply to Royal Ideology, posted by Ikani, (8/06/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/4393.html
47 RE: WHATEVER OR HOWEVER YOU WANT TO CALL MR. POHIYA...STICK TO THE POINT! in NO DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN TONGA, I HOPE NOT!! thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42722.html,
HM is empowered by the Constitution to be head-of-state. In the same time, the people are protected and given rights, too, by the Constitution. (Sione Ake Mokofisi, 8/0399)

By this reckoning, any change is tantamount to courting instability, a threat to the political status quo and 'traditional way of life' (see Chapter Seven) 49. The latter are inseparable (see Helu 1999) in that the social hierarchies of royalty-nobles-commons represent how Tonga and being Tongan is a way of life and a strong cultural way of thinking not a government system (Mapatongiamanu, 15/05/99) 50

The fear (Morton 1996: 264-265), and a loudly stated one hence the capitals, is that

IF THE DEMOCRACY OVERTAKE THE MONARCH THAT WE ARE CURRENTLY RULED BY, THEN BY HEAVEN HELP US BECAUSE THEN ALL THE TROUBLES AND WARS WILL COME ABOUT OUR LITTLE KINGDOM (HOME), THEN IT WON'T BE HOME ANYMORE FOR US. (NINJA, 13/05/99) 51

And this is related to how Tonga is similar or different to other South Pacific Islands, Fiji and Hawaii in particular.

I disagree with you on your assumption that we'll lose our historical CUSTOM or CULTURE if we become more democratic. As I alluded to above, it happened to the Hawaiians because it was a FOREIGN GOVT. (Americans). They had their own CULTURES AND CUSTOMS that were so different from those of the Hawaiians. They replaced that with those of the Hawaiians. Sad, but true! Our situation is DIFFERENT. This is a discussion between Tongans. It is more like an In-House sharings between members of the same family who have opposing views. The good thing about this is that they share the same values, cultures, customs. The people who support the democratic movement is as Tongan as those opposing it. They love the country and the people just as much as those opposing the movement. This love of the country doesn't necessarily means that you have to accept what the Government is doing especially if it is not right. Love of the country can also be taken to mean changing the way the Government is operating. (Tokoni Mai, 16/05/99) 52

Political and social stability vis-a-vis cultural conservation re-emerges as another contour of its own (see below). As for this first one, in many ways the debate boils down to whether this is a benign autocracy albeit with one or two bad apples or a corrupt and nepotistic one masquerading as a 'constitutional monarchy'; also democratic in western terms and not forgotten by pro-royalists here 53. Whether this status quo is indeed a sign of stability or

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48 In reply to We, the People of Tonga/ posted by Ghost, (5/03/99, no longer on server)
49 Let alone where larger power-brokers in the region support the King or his opponents is largely down to their own strategic decisions about 'stability' or 'reform' (Fry 1997, AUSTEO 1997)
50 in reply to Re: GIVE US THE OTHER SIDE posted by Tokoni Mai, 15/05/99 in No Democracy in Tonga. I hope not! thread (initial post by NINJA) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42643.html. This poster also uses her abbreviated name, Manu (see above).
51 re: True All The Way, in reply to Manu (see above) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42568.html
52 Re: Thanks for giving us the otherside, But...., in reply to Mapatongiamanu (see above) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42657.html. Incidentally, 'Tokoni Mai' means 'Help Me' in Tongan. See (Morton 1998a) for more on how signatures such as these denote relationships as much as persons/personalities.
absolute power's corrosive influence is a moot point to say the least. As Futa Helu notes, universal principles (whether they be human / indigenous / democratic rights) are neither pristine in themselves nor in how they operate in any given context.

Although in terms of the Constitution the common people have been emancipated from the arbitrary authority of chiefs, the great legal chiefs of modern Tonga ... still exercise almost unlimited power over commoners by virtue of the culture which requires the latter to defer on all matters to their chiefly masters who are never to be questioned or criticised on any issue whatsoever.....the present trend of political enthusiasms in the country points to harsh political persecution in the future as a real possibility. In fact, the way people in power relentlessly hunt down, in libel suits, the most vociferous critics of the present system and tradition-based privileges suggests that political persecution and subtle (therefore more pernicious) forms of human rights abuses are already in place....(Helu 1999c:35-36) 54

With this astute observation in mind, let us wend our way further onwards.

The second contour is closely related to the first. This is the emergence of a vocal, organised and relatively successful opposition movement advocating electoral reform that would allow commoners more say in governing the country (Morton 1996: 250-251). This by implication means changes in the "adherence to chiefly and royal successions" (KBAdmin 8/02/98 55) if not a complete overhaul of pre-colonial hierarchical gender-power relations and one of their (arguably) colonialist carriers and modernisers, the South Pacific Island churches 56. In the late 20th-early 21st centuries, it is the issue of equitable and effective political representation vis-à-vis the asymmetrical power relationship between those representing commoners and hereditary nobles that is a key focus for discernable discontent - latent and organised, online and offline, at home and abroad. The 'right' to rule and the cultural and spiritual fidelity of the respective hierarchy form an important counterpoint to this discontent.

As a former Peoples' Representative himself, William Afeaki, puts it in an initial posting entitled Solution for Tongan Legislative Assembly...Let the People Elect Representatives of the Nobles!:

Earlier on in the year [the general elections of March 1999] the people of Tonga came

55 The copious threads on religious issues that permeate both the KB and KR are not looked at here (they even had their own site on the KB -the Faith Forum). For the record, one of the largest threads (115 follow-ups) gathered during this research was entitled LDS (Mormon) Has it become americanized? The question asked was;
Has the Mormon church lost all its Tongan way of life? it seems that they have adopted most of the American way of thinking and forgotten their culture... it all seems so american... (Poly Parent, 31/05/99), initial post at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/43340.html. Needless to say the interaction between early Mormon missionaries in Tonga, Tongan daily culture, and diasporic lives is intricately interwoven. The churches in Tonga are part of the political and social establishment and important social and cultural hubs abroad. At the same time they are also "contributing to the swell of social criticism, and some individuals within the church hierarchies are important figures in the pro-democracy movement" (Morton 1996: 254). See Helu (1999d 168-169).
together and spoke their will by electing 9 representatives to the House. So did the 33 hereditary nobles! Their process of election is absolutely ludicrous and it must change. (28/08/99) 57

Afeaki, posting from Utah, goes on to call for moderate reform within the current electoral system, by which:

nobles in the Legislative Assembly will still be accountable to His Majesty who appoints and grants them their hereditary titles and estates. On the other hand, in the Legislative Assembly, they shall also be accountable to the people who voted them into the House. Furthermore, nobles would then be forced to return to their estates to live and be much closer to the subjects... (ibid)

This call for electoral change is also the main leg of the Tongan Pro-Democracy Movement's political platform and its leader, 'Akilisi Pohiva 58. He is one of a number of politicians, intellectuals and journalists who have been urging for full proportional representation in the legislative assembly and commoners' participation in the executive. What this entails is substantial curbing of the ruling elite's hold on executive prerogative and political offices and opening up of the Tongan version of noblesse oblige to public scrutiny. 59 Since at least the mid 1980's and with more momentum in the 1990's, the TPDM has been at the forefront of criticisms of the current regime's performance and legitimacy. In short, all MP's should be elected under equal terms and the cultural, political and economic power of the establishment become more accountable. Steady electoral success has been booked in the last decade or so for candidates on the pro-democracy ticket, with visible annoyance from the ruling elite, although the 1999 elections showed a slight regression. 60 In this respect the incumbent regime has not helped its own case at all by imprisoning Pohiva and two critical journalists in 1996 and 1997. 61 Moreover, the Royal family has been implicated in some financial wheeling and dealing, the most prominent of which being the Sale of Tongan Passports in the 1980's, the 'Tongasat' Satellite business deal that went sour, and monies earned from sales of the '.to' internet domain (see Chapter Two).

These two contours are formed not so much by mutually exclusive positions between pro-Royalty or pro-Democracy but rather between those for change - of some sort - and those for the status quo/against change. Between the why's and the wherefores of either, declared

57 This was posted on the Tonga History Association's discussion forum, a sub-site that is no longer online although the association itself continues.
58 who is also a commoner, MP, and controversial celebrity in Tonga. See Pohiva's Credentials thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42756.html
59 For a good summary of this discontent, see Repost: DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES FOR REFORM IN TONGA (Isikeli, 10/12/99) initial post, SPIN, at http://sunsite.anu.edu.au/spin/wwwboard/messages/2992.html
60 In 1992 six of the nine peoples' representatives "espoused Pro-Democracy ideals" (Swaney 1994:20). By the 1999 elections it seemed that "hanging your political hat on the democracy peg [was] no longer paying dividends .. [as] the pro-democratic faction were given a hiding in the polling booths" (The democracy issue must be willing ... posted by Sefita Auckland New Zealand, 12/03/99). This poster, a Tongan journalist living in New Zealand, put the 1999 results down to "internal dissent and factionalisation" and "bitter bickering". He also wonders as to whether the democracy issue itself had "become irrelevant to a more discerning electorate" and asks whether Tonga was "seeing the dumping of the pro-democracy issue which .. dominated the political platform in Tonga over the last 15 years?" (at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10400.html). For more reactions to these elections see, Final Results .. MP elections : Tongatapu & Vava'u (initial post by Sina Kami, 11/03/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10363.html and A Post-Election Rhyme (initial post by Meilakepa, 23/03/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10439.html.
61 One of these, Kalafi Moala, takes part in one of the few threads about democracy instigated by the KB moderators themselves (Weekly Discussion Topic #51: Democracy in Tonga: Pro or Con?, 7/09/98, no longer on server). In this debate he and another ex-pat, Sione Ake Mokofisi, show how semantics (what is liberal, what is democracy, and what is journalistic objectivity) are indeed political and socially constructed and thereby contestable.
Royalists are present in both camps 62. And various on/offline lines of division overlap here as well; sometimes to be read between the lines and sometimes explicitly, made visible with or without participants attempting to steer the debate. The point is that western-style political representation and notions of universal suffrage are a disputed practice, in Tonga as well as other parts of the South Pacific Islands; Fiji, Hawaii and Aotearoa/New Zealand being cases in point (van Meijl 1998, Tcherkézoff 1998). Discussions about what it does and should mean in practice are highly charged especially when diasporic pro-royalists are pitted against pro-change supporters, as in the case of these three participants on one thread:

Tonga has survived being swallowed up by big countries because it was run by tradition and custom not by politics which is exactly what democracy is all about.
(Manu 13/05/99) 63

Thank you for SHARING with us your view ..... I agree with every point you made. However, I do need your help on another matter. Your post deal only with the negative side of democracy. Can you now share with us the positive side. I mean, democracy cannot be that all bad, can it? OR Are you saying that it is good for everybody else including you and all the Tongans overseas (NZ, USA, Australia, Europe etc.) and it is bad for the Tongans in Tonga? Is that what you are saying? (Tokoni Mai, 14/05/99) 64

Okay so u don't [like] the idea of a democracy in Tonga. Then I suppose you prefer the way that it is run now. What about the multiple injustices across the country?.....Every man to his opinion, mine is strong with conviction that the King needs to take heed to the predominant current forces. Monarchies only exists nowadays largely due to them acting as figureheads..... I can't say that the King has ever given reason for a political violent outburst but he has ignored the people's cry for more equality in Parliament. He must help the people in this way and not fear the inevitable. Because he holds the reins on every segment in the country, one cannot force a revolution or anything of the kind. ....I expect an abusive comment to this article but at least I said it coz I can't stand the present system and that's why I am thinking of leaving this country. I cannot work under these rules and corrupt departments...Out and over. (Makafitu, 19/05/99) 65

All the samples thus far indicate how democratic meanings and politics are inculcated with historical and sociocultural ones and unabashedly so. In the sub-thread below that was about half-way through the massive thread about "chiefly and royal successions", one of the (Palangi) online leadership interacts with a regular - a woman - about basic definitions.

I am a little puzzled that the primary focus in the responses so far has been on "democracy" per se...as though this is a topic which pits "royalists" against "pro-democrats", and I do not see it that way. Rather, I see the question's emphasis (and maybe I am alone in this) on the process of "succession" which does not preclude maintaining the current system of monarchy, chiefs and nobles...only revising the process by which those positions are filled." (Sandy Macintosh, 12/02/98) 66

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62 For instance; "The main issues I wanted to raise is that being pro-democracy does not constitute being anti-monarchy. And being pro-monarch should not mean anti-democracy..." (Kalafi Moala, 12/09/98 in Weekly Discussion Topic #51: Democracy in Tonga: Pro, or Con?, 7/09/98, no longer on server)
63 in reply to No Democracy Movement in Tonga, I Hope not! posted by Ninja (12/05/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42558.html
65 HOW ABOUT A MONARCH ACTING ONLY AS A FIGUREHEAD, in reply to Ninja's initial post at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42803.html
66 Are We Getting Sidetracked? Koe Ngahi Tali 'Eni Ki He Fehui Ki 'Olunga?, in reply to: DISCUSSION TOPIC #24 - ADHERENCE TO CHIEFLY AND ROYAL SUCCESIONS (8/02/98, no longer on server). The poster, Sandy who is a former Peace Corps volunteer in Tonga, is a prominent member of the KB and one of the mainstays of the administration. He was also the instigator and author
To put it bluntly my dear Sandy, I for one don't want the Crown Prince Tupouto'a nor any of the Royal household to succeed into Political Leadership. I would very much like a Constitutional Monarchy as per the British system thank you very much. We find it hard to differentiate between the Royal Family and Politics because they are so much part, if not the core, of our current political system that you ask questions about Royal successions, it is the same thing as political succession. However, instead of telling you what they really want to say, they post advocating change, when the bottom line is change means political change. I am not a fan of the Royal family, only because of the discrepancies in regards to their personal dealings in what should be Public Assets. I think that with regards to a pure Royal Succession for the Crown Prince, I have no problem, and I will hail Long Live the King, as loud as the next Royalist. I just don't want him to have the power to Veto Parliament decisions. I say it is high time, the people be allowed to take a real and effective part in deciding their future, not have the future taken away by the actions of a very few and select elite. (Tiana, 13/02/98)

They also re-articulate some gender-power hierarchies which in a Tongan/diasporic setting have their own particular cross-resonances (see below).

You contradict, then confirm (should I say, "Just like a woman")? Naw...I'd better not! Hehehe) and I must say that you and I are on the same page politically. You see, I am VERY much a Royalist (vis-à-vis Tonga), myself, but, like you, am concerned about the quality of the next monarch should traditional succession take place..... This whole discussion regarding the on-going democracy-versus-monarchy debate is a whole 'nother issue that is outside the intent of the original question." (Sandy, 13/02/98)

Now look who's being contradictory my friend?.. you're 'concerned about the quality of the next monarch should traditional succession take place' yet you still 'feel the Royal Family has a better candidate to offer.' May I ask the basis for your concern and feelings? Royal succession in Tonga unlike anywhere else in the world is not a political or public matter, it is a personal matter in the Royal household and as it has always been, traditional 'First Born' succession. I don't care about this succession as such because it is a foregone conclusion. It is the stagnant political situation with which I have the problem. Nevertheless, you're quite welcome to join me on rank in 'womanhood' anytime my friend hehehehe. (Tiana, 13/02/98, in reply to Sandy).

Polynesian conceptions of rank and status notwithstanding (see Tiana above, Morton 1996:2-3, Ortnier 1996, Jolly & Macintyre 1989), throughout the Pacific Islands, public political representation and discourses in Samoa and Tonga at least are generally dominated by men, of high rank (Tcherkézoff 1998, Helu 1999a). There are exceptions in Polynesian royal lines of succession, the Hawaiian and New Zealand Maori Queens, and the late Queen Salote of Tonga being cases in point. On these internet forums, in contemporary indigenous sovereignty movements and younger generations of the diasporic populations, women have been becoming more and more vocal (Morton 1998, 1999). In this respect the online Kavabowl with its numerous and vocal female - and non-noble - voices are not representative of formal Kava Ceremonies nor of the Tongan Parliament for that matter.

The third contour emerges out of the first two. It is one in which pro-royals and pro-change advocates actually do agree on, to a certain extent. This is the issue of individual ministers' poor performances in office (who are by definition from the nobility) and whether they are adequately in touch with their constituencies, especially those outside the main city of Nuku'alofa. For those who advocate more radical change the current rulers are simply not doing a good enough job but are not under any pressure to do so and so are evidence of the need for


67 Not Side-tracked Sandy, still on track... just not your track!! in reply to Sandy (see above)

68 Not Side-tracked? Oh, okay. In reply to Tiana (see above).
new political blood:

The people need to have the power to elect into Government the Prime Minister, Ministers and the people they see fit to rule the land. The present form of Government, as you know very well, gave that power to the King, his Cabinet and the Fakataha Tokoni [translate]. These Ministers of the Crown, once they are appointed can hold that office until they are too old to serve anymore and in some cases, until they die. What happened if they do not do their job or they CONTINUE TO ABUSE THEIR POWER? The answer: Its anybody's guess. (Tokoni Mai, 15/05/99)  

The lack of transparency over foreign exchange, earnings and distribution of "public money" from government-run business schemes are also a point for dissension and grist to the reformers' mill. Grinding corruption scandals and nepotism, both of which have been fuelled by Tonga's rulers' treatment of opponents have given impetus to calls for change (Amnesty International 1996, Coggan 1997, Dixon 1996). The following post sums up this discontent very well and makes clear where change should occur:

There are so many things that need to be changed in the kingdom starting from the very bottom. The heavy equipment operators run their own operation within the government time and pocket the money. The government operated fishmarket employees take home meat whenever they wish without showing on the record. Labour personnel remove (form the premise) properties that they are not authorized to. The authorities misuse thier power when it comes to government properties and vehicles. The police officers are scamps. The immigration/police officers at checkpoint at the Fua'amotu airport will let anything through with some bribery money. The legislative assembly members (people and noble reps.) misuse their benefits. The royal family control the tv network, space right, the internet right, the overseas land right, the cabinet seat right, the head of the military right, the right to be in Tonga, the right to modify the constitution, etc., etc., The problem is that the resources are not divided evenly and every that everyone is a scam straight from the very top to the laborers. Now how are we going to either weed them out or change the system to a more even an honest system? I think we should correct the top because when the person at the top is an honest one, he/she won't allow any dishonesty or twisting the system." (Fonua 'a e kakai 'a e fonua, 16/02/98)  

But it is not only incumbents - royals, ministers - who come under the spotlight though. Prominent Pro-Democracy activists themselves, who are members of a loose coalition at the best of times, get thrown into the fray. Either under their own volition by mixing it with the participants online (Moala and Afeaki) but also as public figures in their own right. The atmosphere of a contemporary offline "informal kava party" for "commoner classes .. which includes no chiefs" (Helu 1999: 5) is transposed into an online version where also the "whole aim here is to freely and openly discuss topical issues and any subject under the sun that may catch the interest of those participating.." (ibid). This time with women included, however. If these politicians and intellectuals are not being taken task for being abroad, their performance itself is questioned directly - and defended. For instance:

I was a Representative of the People in the Tongan Assembly for two consecutive terms. I know what I am talking about. This is my business. I am a Tongan citizen and subject, therefore, I have vested interest in the future of Tonga and its government. Under the Tongan constitution, there are two offices that are given the powers to make laws in the land i.e. the King and the Legislative Assembly. The latter must be given full rights to do that. Right now, Cabinet and the Privy Council introduced all the Bills to the House..(wpafeaki, 29/08/99)  

69 NOTHING IS SIMPLE WHEN IT INVOLVES POLITICS!! in reply to Re. Look my friend, it's as simple as this.. posted by Ninja (14/05/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42647.html  
70 I will share my opinion and hope I won't offend anyone, in reply to Discussion Topic #25: Adherence to Chiefly and Royal Successions (KBAdmin, 8/02/98, KB, no longer on server)  
71 MY VERY YOUNG FRIEND!!!! in reply to Vai ko Hiva (28/08/99) in Solution for Tongan Legislative
All I was asking, was what have you done for Tonga?... Let us focus in the real issue here, what are we, the people of Tonga, going to achieve from this? Or, should I say benefit from this? If the members of parliament are serious about this issue what can't they halve their salary and donate the other half for charity?..... Of the nobels, I'd rather keep the devil I know than the devil I don't know. (Vai ko hiva, 1/09/99) 

As for the Devil that you know and the one that you don't know, perhaps it is time for you to find out more about the latter and get to know him better. We need constitutional reforms in Tonga and not a revolution! (wpafeaki, 1/09/99 in reply to above)

However, it is the TPDM leader 'Akilisi Pohiva who is the subject of one of the longest threads with the title: Pohiva's credentials? (Manu 18/05/99). The initial poster - a prominent pro-royalist - is taken to task for suggesting that Pohiva (not part of the nobility) 'only' has a Bachelor's degree and that the Royals, with Master's degrees are thereby better qualified. In other threads, Pohiva's record in office comes under attack, as does the extent of some of his proposed political reforms vis-à-vis stability and cultural preservation. He is either a traitor in that

OUR OTHER POLYNESIAN COUSINS (POLYNESIAN COUNTRIES), IN HAWAII AND SO FORTH, WAS BETRAYED MOSTLY BY OTHER CULTURES. THE SAD THING IS OUR OWN TONGAN BROTHER 'AKILISI POHIVA, IS THE TRADER TO US TONGANS. TRADER TO HIS OWN COUNTRY, AND OWN KIND. (NINJA, 13/05/99)

or he is the "VOICE OF CHANGE in Tonga.. fighting for the right of the people to choose and elect their own leaders" (Tokoni Mai, 14/05/99). These polarised declarations positions notwithstanding (either in terms of the number of different posters or posting frequency), these interactions reiterate the 'what sort of political change and how far' problematic as a sociocultural issue. They also articulate online political campaigning without the mediation of 'spin doctors'. As Afeaki, puts it:

I feel 'Akilisi's proposals are extreme and would disrupt a lot of values that we currently cherish and enjoy. I truly think that the Pro-Democracy Movement is losing momentum and credibility. There is an urgent need therefore, that we come up with alternatives that would be a more accountable government without disrupting and sacrificing the other niceties of Tongan living! (wpafeaki, 3/09/99)

For the sharpest critics the system is corrupt anyway and without checks and balances.

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Assembly... Let the People Elect Representatives of the Nobles! thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/tonga/messages/6164.html

72 I'd rather have the devil I know, than the devil I don't in reply to MY VERY YOUNG FRIEND! (wpafeaki 29/08/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/tonga/messages/6208.html. This interchange does start to get personal but not overly so (see Chapter Eight).

73 at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42756.html

74 Education is highly valued in the Pacific Islands, and especially in Tonga. It is one reason for younger generations going abroad for university study. They are also sent to high school in Australia, New Zealand and USA by their families. Other threads are packed with discussions and testimonies about the social isolation, cultural clashes and benefits this entails. The Weekly Discussion Topics are particularly packed with these sorts of concerns.

75 this is phonetically spelt. A good example of the spoken quality of online written-as- spoken textual practices

76 Re: TRUE ALL THE WAY in reply to Re: NO DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN TONGA, I HOPE NOT!! posted by Manu at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42568.html

77 RE: HOW DO YOU KNOW? in reply to TRUE ALL THE WAY posted by NINJA (13/05/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/42619.html

78 Ko' eku tali ari in reply to Re: Waste of Time... TO WHO??? posted by Tu'a Mamani (31/08/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/tonga/messages/6280.html in Solution for Tongan Legislative Assembly... thread.
There is no point in discussing the merits of mere people as in 'Akilisi vs Tupouto'a [the Crown Prince] because then we lose sight of the bigger picture, and this can also be labelled as useless and ridiculous personal slander. It is the System that's crooked, enabling even more crooked decisions and people to prosper. (Tiana, 13/02/98)  

The fourth contour is already evident in the previous three for it is a constant sub-text if not explicit reference point for all sides in these debates. It is also the most complex for it cuts through the cultural backdrop and historical legacy of colonial rule in the whole region. What is called 'traditionalism' - appeals to pre-contact practices and institutions as a reaction to western ones - is highly contested in Pacific intellectual and academic circles (Hau'ofa 1987, Hereniko & Wilson 1999). For some it amounts to what Hau'ofa criticises as

romantic neo-traditionalism ...championed by those who are reaping the juiciest fruits that the world capitalist economy gives. These champions tend to wail by the banks of the River of Babylon and proclaim undying devotion to what they have abandoned.... (1987:165)  

On the other hand, rejection of the sociocultural and political economic implications of 19th-20th century colonial administrations, and more recently of 'globalisation', are also part of a conscious counter politics and postcolonial intellectual movement, the Hawaiian and New Zealand Maori sovereignty movements being two of the more high profile examples of these (Trask 1999, Teiwa 1999, Grace 1999).

In any case, this fourth contour forms around the relationship between ostensibly indigenous forms and understandings of democracy, cultural and national identity and the definition and preservation of either or both, with or without constitutional changes. Added to this potent mix is how historical interpretations are used to support or refute any claims 81. There are four main inflections here. The first is that of how the very 'traditions' and the history-making that underpin them are disputable in themselves. Are not the traditions that are being so 'fiercely' defended simply 'palangi implants' anyway and more to the point, where do the

79 AMEN AMEN AMEN!, in reply to POLITICAL CORRECTIONS MUST APPLY TO THE TONGAN LIFE (13/02/98), in Weekly Discussion Topic #24 thread (no longer on server)  
80 This is particularly difficult in discussions about recent Chinese immigration into Tonga (related as well to a long-simmering affair about the sale of Tongan passports). This issue not dealt with here. Suffice it to say that Hau'ofa's point about double standards does get 'outed' online. For example, one poster notes that

The irony is that it is the present conservative system who is allowing Chinese to settle in Tonga which invites these hostilities from all those "romanticised" Tongans who left their "beloved" country behind for God to look after and protect from the rest of the world. One would think that those people who favour retention of homogeneity will be behind a change in the present system. But it is in fact the contrary is true, i.e those in favour of pure cultural maintenance in Tongan is behind the very system who allow ( and will continue) the very people the "hate" to make Tongan their home for now and for the future. I do not see any logic in their thinking. (kolitto, 8/02/99)  

We can have our Sovereign State, "save" some of our culture without being Racist to Chinese in reply to WEEKLY DISCUSSION TOPIC #65: Chinese Threatening Tongan Culture? Get Over It...This Is Old Hat! (KB Admin, 7/02/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/4380.html  
81 Without entering into complex anthropological topographies of non-western political systems (see Orter 1996), the following historical précis, albeit partisan and selective (but what history is not?), should suffice for now:

Tonga was the first archipelagos to be settled by Polynesians travelling from South East Asia. They arrived in at least 1140 BC. The Tongans are closely related in culture and language to their neighbours the Samoans. They have adopted many traits from the Fijians. They developed a society which continues to centralise power into the hands of an elite. A patrilineal people, their society is divided into nobles and commoners. The genealogy of the nobles ranks them closest to the ancestor to which they draw their lineage. The Tongan kings trace their lineage back to the union between a Tongan woman and the sky-god Tangaroa. They were perceived as demigods and their power was absolute." (Pro-Democracy Movement sub-site of Pacific Connections) at http://www.pasifika.net/pacific_action/national/t/tonga.html:2/10)
Who cares what the palangis want? Why not let the Tongan people decide what sort of government they want? Again, in the absence of change they are deciding what sort of system they want, and are leaving Tonga in droves. The country is literally bleeding to death yet some Tongans remain wedded to this outmoded, archaic century old system. The current Tongan monarchy is, after all, a palangi implant. Look at an official portrait of HM. It is very instructive, and provides a powerful metaphor concerning the nature of this system that many are so keen to preserve. What you see is a Polynesian dressed in a lot of European trappings. And so is the current system of government in Tonga. (George Candler, 9/09/98)  

Secondly, not only are the 'facts' at stake but irrespective of their being located in pre or post-contact Tonga, existing social hierarchies are seen to be problematic anyway. And even more so vis-à-vis the notion of universal equality contained in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights (see Helu 1999c). For instance, modern land tenure in Tonga is essentially male-centred but also based on noble privileges. Whilst eldest sisters hold high ranks (fahu) within Tongan extended family (kainga) structures (Ortner 1996), they are not demographically represented in parliament. All in all, longstanding differences in social status, land tenure, income and social-economic obligation [kavenga], and those who object to these become merged into the third inflection; arguments over the applicability of liberal political economic models for postcolonial times. For just how applicable are capitalist versions of democracy to the South Pacific Islands? There are more than a few cynical postings about this which serve to complicate the moral arguments even further:

The big green-machine of capitalism and imperialism bred by democracy makes the call. The rest of us are just paying rent. It's called assimilation - and the world has come to know it all too well. (Makavili, 9/08/98)

Whilst it would be convenient to link such sentiments to pro-royalists and thereby insinuate that all objections to 'democracy' use tradition as an excuse for resisting any changes or denying charges being levelled at the government, this is too simplistic. It assumes that the converse, a western-style liberal capitalist political economy is the answer. Given the west's own identity politics and vested economic interests in this regard such a slippage is not surprising. Postcolonial identity formation and political cultures are much more complex processes. For diasporas they can involve both nostalgic images of 'home' and reactionary forms of 'long-distance nationalism' (where the internet/www is a ready stage to play these out on) and neo-traditionalism that can slip into essentialist cultural categories (Hau'ofa 1987). They can also entail beliefs in individual rights and liberal ideals of equality that come from having lived in the USA and elsewhere, hence support for the Tongan Pro-Democracy Movement. On the other hand, experiences of social and economic deprivation there can also lead to an awareness of how the ideal type of 'democracy' is not all it is cracked up to be.

And for those whose women, at home and abroad, who equate political change with
yet more western impositions on their own cultural integrity, any historical interpretation and sociocultural identification go hand-in-hand. For example:

First you're assuming that you have a monopoly on the idea of "change." As I stated, all Tongans have all kinds of ideas of how changes are to be made. For instance, I favor a change to return the Monarchy to the old Polynesian system. That's when everything was decided by a more democratic Council of Chiefs. Changing the present system to a more Palangi-like democracy is just too Palangi for me. (Sione Ake Mokofisi, 17/09/98) 86

....so it isn't democracy you object to, its' palangi-like ideas. And Christianity, is this not palangi-like? (George Candler, 17/09/98, in reply to above) 87

Occasional stand-offs like the above, between Tongan and non-Tongan, at-home and diasporic posters notwithstanding, further on in this thread the fourth inflection comes to light; Tonga and the rest of the region/the world. This is couched in terms of applicability, both practically and philosophically:

Democracy is not a bad political system. Monarchy is also not a bad political system. They should be looked at as "tools" to be used to "operate" a society compatible with its cultures, beliefs and other necessary environments. We must, therefore, define the "ideal" society for Tonga. For example, an independent island, preserve its traditions and cultural activities, maintain its strong belief in Christianity, inheritance of land, respecting of elders and females and so on... We then ask, what system that can deliver this "ideal" society??? Democracy? or Monarchy? I think we can find the answer. (SPusiaki, 21/09/98) 88

and further on...

The whole wide world do not have to follow what the "papalangi" people 89 says. Each society has its own unique way of "operating" its own political system. We do not have to copy.......!!!! (SPusiaki, 24/09/98, op cit)

I understand the "reality" of Tonga perfectly, no doubt about it, but my concern is with the "ideal" society you depicted above...and true also, that we don't have to "copy." but how can Tonga bring to life the "ideal" society, without doing the kopi kat thing...it is hard to imagine either...(tootsy, 24/09/98, in reply to above)

What I would argue, based on over a thousand separate postings (not counting overlapping ones from other discussions) is that whilst the current leadership in Tonga is indeed under pressure to change, what many of participants in this forum are articulating is that how this is done and to what extent must be on their own terms.

I have watched this debate absorb our little nation of Tonga for the past 12 years and I have come to my own conclusions..... Do we need Democracy? In a country like the USA, yes. In Tonga....No - but a system with more accountability is necessary. The Ministers should be elected from the people and the Nobles could form a separate House for approval and debate of issues brought through the elected house of parliament. Cabinet would be formed from the Parliament. The King is STILL the head of state. MY OBSERVATION: it is NOT the kind of system that decides on a successful Government.. it is the integrity and vision of leadership that is more

86 in reply to Inevitability of Change? posted by Tiana (15/09/98), in Weekly Discussion Topic #51 (op cit)
87 George is a regular palagi (American) participant in these forums.
88 in reply to Tootsy, in above thread
89 another rendition of 'palangi' - white/non-Tongans
important. (vatu, 12/02/98) 90

To recapitulate briefly. In everyday life in the islands and overseas, to speak of - or criticise - 'the government' of Tonga is to speak more often than not of the King and his ministers, although not necessarily 91. To be 'pro-democratic' in the more polarised debates is often to be labelled 'anti-royal'. In this rendition, that is tantamount to being 'anti-Tongan'. In other words, to call for radical constitutional change is seen by many as going too far as it casts aspersions on not only the 'traditional' ways and systems but also the very integrity of 'Tongan-ness'. To support the current status quo and its historical legitimacy may be to call for the preservation of cultural identity, uniqueness but not all of those who profess to being 'pro-Royal' reject 'democracy' or the need for change as such. Critiquing or questioning either is pitted against differences about what culture, identity, politics should be in a postcolonial era (Morton 1996: 20-22, Chapter Seven). Whence the calls for and against 'tradition' (see Tarte 2000) that also vie with some astute observations on the state of the art of western democracy. The following post articulates these countervailing forces very well. I shall quote in its entirety for not only is it eloquent but it is also a passionate - and wry - account of life overseas for many of the Pacific Islands' diaspora (who are thought to be living in the lap of luxury by some of those still living in the islands).

Excuse me, I take offence at this comment that we Tongans do not know any better...that we are brainwashed...that I am used to having it so bad...that I have a dictator ruling over me. Are you talking about Tongans or Cubans? Do you know what a dictator is?? Do we hear any boat loads of refugees coming ashore in Australia from Tonga, or do we hear Qantas special flights bringing refugees from Tonga to live in Tasmania?? Have things changed so badly in Tonga that I, in Sydney, am not aware of? What's this rubbish about electing my leader, pay him and expect him to do a good job?? I live in Sydney, I elect people to lead me who do not do a good job as far I am concerned - not good for me anyway, good for them and their business friends and political allies, but not good for poor old Altius, commoner, work 9-5, get minimum wage, pay lots of taxes, struggle on public transport to get to work while the people I elect get transported around in air cond. limousines doing deals left, right and centre, pocket a lot of extra money, fly first class, kids at top exclusive private schools, ski at the Swiss Alps, eat at first class restaurants, fly to Paris for shopping and stop over in Monaco for a bit of casino ALL ON ALTITUS' TAX!!!! I was born in Tonga, very friendly place, friendly leaders, no police coming around at midnight and scare us to death or throw us out of our little Tongan house (dictators do that!), my father gets a piece of land which lies unused in the islands, we have come to Sydney to get a better life. I struggled, I worked, I studied, got my degree and am enjoying a Government job. I love Tonga and our political system. If I had the money I would go back today. I am not being brainwashed, never had it so bad as Cubans or some Indians in India or struggling Africans. I have no inferior complex to being a commoner. I am just another commoner in Sydney. I am not Kerry Packer or Rupert Murdoch or Susan Peacock Sangster Renouf. I do not count. But I am happy. Hope you are. (Altius, 8/06/99) 92

This declaration and the links it makes to personal and broader histories and tensions, along with its own ambivalences and internal contradictions, leads us into the two main nuances to these contours.

**Nuances**

These are, in shorthand, *situated experience* and *inter/subjectivity*. They create their own twists and turns within and between various threads. These may well have become evident

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90 KING?? AKILIS?? FREEDOM??, in reply to Weekly Discussion Topic #24 thread.

91 My thanks to Heather Young Leslie and Mike Evans for this observation.

92 in reply to: Re: ROYAL IDEOLOGY posted by aakulahi, 8/06/99, in Royal Ideology thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/44032.html.
for some readers by now, so the following observations will serve as highlighters.

Taking it as read that no one line of division can be easily drawn between pro-royalists and pro-change/democracy supporters, these do crystallise in terms of posters' (stated) situation (at-home or abroad) as well as their stated/assumed social (self)demarcation (commoner or nobility, pro or anti-change.) The thread as a visual image oscreen, its 'textual surface' (see Carver 1998), explicit lines of identification and affiliation, styles and argumentation all vary accordingly 98. Their articulations also overlap, counteract and (try to) trip each other up over the course of a prolonged thread or period 99. 'Situated' also denotes not only where a participant is physically posting from - the Pacific Islands/ Tonga or the west - but also where they say they have lived or are living. This particular line of division and the relative (il)legitimacy that goes with it applies all sides. For anti-change/pro-royals this means having to respond to accusations of either double standards (see above) or ignorance of 'how things really are in Tonga'. For example:

Where do you get your stories from? Second hand, third hand? Do you have documents in front of you that you can say, hey look at this. .....I lived in Tonga for 20 years (Altius, 09/06/99) 93

To answer your "question:" I do go back to Tonga when I feel like it, and it's a free country where everyone is allowed to travel freely, speak his/her mind, but most importantly, to choose to remain as much Tongan as he/she likes. Living in another country does not negate my love for my home island.... (Sione Ake Mokofisi, 13/02/99) 96

Where one is - or isn't - also matters to anti-royal/pro-democracy advocates, moderates and interested bystanders. The following selections show at least three different angles on this; ideological, in terms of 'authenticity', and geographic.

I am a pro-democracy believer, this was due to my experiences growing up as a child and also as a young adult in Tonga... As we have observed for decades, Tongans grow up in Tonga and due to the lack of opportunities locally look overseas and emigrate not only for a better life outside, but also to help the rest of the family still living in Tonga. (Tiana, 9/03/99) 97

My parents are from Tonga and I was born and raised in the United States. The only "thing" that I follow is the upbringing of my family and our heavenly father 98. ....Tongans are so hung up on this caste system that they can't seem to see straight.

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93 These can be seen on the initial posts which have follow-ups that can go on for pages when printed out. These include ever-indenting sub-threads between protagonists that often move into the 'politics of the personal'. For instance in the substantial discussion of Weekly Discussion Topic #24: about Chiefly and Royal Successions (8/02/98) a sub/sub-thread spanning 38 postings (out of a total of 221) developed between a "scared finemui [young woman] loyal to Tonga" and pro-change advocates. When the former eventually admitted to "being one of them royal bloods" she was greeted with the following retort: "... I don't blame you for getting so hot., you royal blood is so thick ... Take some blood thinner - i.e. democracy...." (posted by Hang your 'royal blood' by the keyboard before entering the KB, 13/02/98, in Reply to: I guess you have no understanding whatsoever....nofo a, 13/02/98, no longer on server)

94 The same posters - real names and in various forms of incognito - are present over the 2-3 years of these discussions. They know and refer to each other accordingly. Some of them we will meet again in Chapter Seven.

95 In reply to me'apango (9/09/99) in Royal Ideology thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/44061.html

96 Re: I'm Keeping an Eye on You All, In Reply to: Yah, Lets talk shop!! posted by questions (12/02/99) in Longest Serving Rulers thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/4559.html

97 All in the name of the 'Kainga', in reply to Be Careful What Yo Pray For... ( Sandy Mackintosh 9/03/99) In We, The People of Tonga thread at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10298.html

98 These online communities have a strongly religious Christian constituency and the Kava Bowl at least designates itself as a 'conservative' forum.
Reality is, most Tongans are related to each other through blood or marriage and we're all pretty much the same people. I just wish that the people that ALWAYS have something negative to say about Tonga and its government, would DO something instead of showing off their fancy education and expansive vocabulary. I can sit back with my Master's or PhD and criticize a systems that's been intact for thousands of years OR I can sit and do something positive for myself and the immediate community around me. I know there are TONS of Tongans out there who are helping themselves and others in their community and they're not doing it by whining and complaining on an Internet forum... (Observer-MT, 8/03/99)  

I know you were born and raised up here in the States and has been *fua kavenga* [beholden] to the "Palangi" people. We the Tongans that were born and raised in Tonga has been *fua kavenga* to the Tongans especially our King and his family and ...our Nopelē [nobles]...(Pure-Tongan, 17/12/99, in reply to above)  

Again, it is also one way to dispute the legitimacy of the post(er).  

ARE YOU TONGAN AND WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN LIVING? cause you don't sound like one Tongan at all, and I think I have the feeling that you never lived in Tonga for a little period of time to know what's going on around in our land... (Finemui, 13/02/98)  

In terms of diasporic posters (the majority) their concrete situations and experience are part and parcel of their 'inter/subjective' identity - as an 'individual' and member of an extended family and/or social position.  

I wanted to suggest that if you are indeed anti or pro-royalist then DO something about it - don't repeat your arguments till we're all tired of hearing it. Royal ideology is popular and does take up a lot of space on the KB forum. If one feels so strong on an issue, what does one do with it? In Tonga if you jump up in protest against the governing bodies, you'll most probably be shunned and told to keep quiet. So, since a number of us are not in Tonga, what can we do? (Ikani, 09/06/99)  

These references to the complex and symbolic articulations of the 'oppression of the present' (de Certeau in Giard & Mayol 1980:7) can be discerned from the extent of personal detail provided and by the responses and retorts that ensue from the more polarised discussions. Hints and references to any given on/offline situation and person(al) details are scattered all the way through and across threads.  

You are right up to a point in that to proceed to a level as you are mentioning is quite frightening, but I must say that from my observation as a Tongan living in Australia for most of my life, most of the Nobles/Ministers are incapable of taking Tonga into the next Millenium. With all the royalty in key positions, Tonga is like their "family business"....... For Tonga to move up in the world, we must take into account ideas from people who have researched and observed first hand such a change. We cannot afford to be narrow minded in such a changing world, otherwise Tonga will be left behind. I believe that once the King is gone, the Island's future is very bleak (the King has such respect from his people, including myself, but who is of the same calibre that would be capable of taking over?). What Akilisi is trying to do is, in itself, a way of helping  

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99 in reply to *Re: DARK MIND!!!* (oBeErVeR 8/03/99) in *We, the People of Tonga* thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10223.html  
100 at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/50505.html  
101 *FIRST TELL ME THIS PLEASE...* in reply to: *Re: DISCUSSION TOPIC #24 - ADHERENCE TO CHIEFLY AND ROYAL SUCCESSIONS* (ekoa 'e ha moe pot meaningful questioned by anybody PLEASE EXPLAIN, 12/02/98, no longer on server).  
102 *PLEASE GUYS COME BACK TO MY 1st LETTER* in reply to *ROYAL IDEOLOGY* (Ikani 8/06/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/44087.html.
Tonga stand up and look at its current position, and make informed decisions on certain issues, eg are you happy that the King lives in luxury whilst his people are contemplating where their next meal is coming from? Before we eliminate such opinions (as that of Akilisi's), let us first of all study indepth such ideas/opinions, and make informed decisions. (Fakapale Lot'aniu, 14/02/98)

As the above examples illustrate, the arguments put forward are shaped by the very social positions of relative privilege that are at stake, by family or political allegiances to the Tongan royal house and nobility, monarchy per se, Polynesian/Tongan 'traditions', personal experiences abroad and nostalgia for the country of origin. So are the gender-power permutations of these personal and group histories also intertwined. The ensuing identifications with benefits and obligations that come from status and birthright privileges for certain women and structural exclusions that come with being a woman and/or commoner are both disputed and offered as affirmation. With varying degrees of clarity and intensity, diasporic and local experiences vie with family and class-status loyalties and desire for both political change and/or cultural preservation.

I grew up in Tonga and I love the place. I often wonder about this debate so I'd like to throw in a few thoughts, perhaps fish for a few more responses, at the risk of coming under fire by the fierce Sione Ake Mokofisi [vocal pro-Royalist]. Tonga is such a beautiful place with beautiful people. As the 'friendly islands', wouldn't it be fitting for it to be a place of totally equal opportunity, where all individuals were equally respected just for being people, no special conditions attached? Alas that may only be in Utopia. I agree with Kalafi Moala in the sense that if there is a need for change in Tonga, then a variation of democracy that is suitable to Tongan society should be worked out. But how much will a 'more democratic' system with a 'less powerful etc' monarchy, take away from Tongans what it means to be Tongan?... (Jamie, 12/09/98)

There is another aspect as well, pertinent to online communities that have as their base diasporic populations living in western democratic systems. This is the difference between and relative level of participation of those living abroad and those living in Tonga itself. In these debates, locality, time spent away from the islands and/or whether someone has ever been there or not (and this is often not for 2nd generations living in USA, NZ, Australia) can be deeply politicised. Despite the fact that pro-democracy candidates have been steadily voted into the parliament in Tonga in the last 10-15 years, some pro-Royalists would have it that the movement is an arm of diasporic provocateurs who seek to upset Tonga's political and social stability. These threads show, however, that diasporic communities have fractions that are as fiercely loyal to the Tongan Monarchy as those who would instigate constitutional changes to allow "commoners a greater say in the running of our country." Being an 'ex-pat' becomes part of the argument in itself as the following observation shows:

There is a humorous side to the discussion re democracy in Tonga. I have been labelled as a liberal by Mr. Mokofisi [a regular pro-royalist]. I'm emailing his post to all my liberal friends who for years have accused and labelled me a conservative for my beliefs in the basic principles of democracy (justice, human rights, and moral decency) and for my biased endorsement of Christian principles (as opposed to endorsement of Islamic or

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103 In reply to Finemui in Re: DISCUSSION TOPIC #24 - ADHERENCE TO CHIEFLY AND ROYAL SUCESSIONS.

104 In Tonga this is the fahu system; namely familial (and aristocratic to commoner) hierarchical privileges and obligations of the first-born sister in the Tongan extended family (kainga) structure. In short, relatively speaking the first-born daughter/sister/sister-in-law has higher status over her first-born brother/sister-in-law. This is a complex set of gender-power relations which can not be gone into here. See Ortner (1996) and Morton (1996) for two different views - and their literature bases - on these relationships.

105 In Reply to Weekly Discussion Topic # 51: Democracy In Tonga: Pro, or Con? posted by KB Admin (7/09/98, no longer on server).

106 www.pasifika.net/pacific_action/national/t/tonga.html:9
other religious beliefs). Anyway, thanks Mr. Mokofisi for your comments. Your point is taken. I trust you have taken my point. It is not an attempt to persuade you, rather a statement of what I believe IS!! Criticisms - welcomed indeed! One last correction before I'm over and out. I am not a part of a political party in Tonga or elsewhere (as you've stated), even though I endorse the principles of democracy. (Most of my colleagues around the world do!). And am not currently living in Tonga. In fact I'm a Tongan born American who lived in Tonga but is now banned in Tonga by the Police Minister for my writings. (Kalafi Moala, 15/09/98) 107

Three more aspects to these nuances need more elaboration, which are embedded in these particular debates. The first is an extension on earlier comments on 'gender-power relations' vis-à-vis political under-representation and/ or participation by women-as-a-group in Tonga or elsewhere in the South Pacific. These online debates about Democracy and Tonga are unlike other major discussions threads in both the Kava Bowl and the Polynesian Cafe that deal with (homo)sexuality and sexual mores, love and marriage, domestic violence and gangs, religion and social conventions. The latter are more self-conscious articulations of diasporic practices of everyday life that cut across what constitutes femininity and masculinity and the tensions that come with these at any one time (Chapter Five). In these less overtly 'political' discussions, online articulations of gender-power relations are easier to trace in that the threads are all about questioning and challenging ahistorical and culturally essentialist explanations or categorisations like 'woman' or 'man', Polynesian/Western, (hetero) sexuality, culture in a diasporic - and often disadvantaged - context (Chapters Five and Seven). In contrast, in the threads examined here it is the accepted and would-be meanings and practices of 'democracy' that take precedence. The same participants - women as well as men - do not foreground 'gender' per se 108. What they do emphasise are the cultural/ethnic and class/status permutations that are at stake. The substantial presence and activity of women posters (see Morton 1998/99) online nonetheless indicates a nascent shift in their political (self)consciousness and self-perception.

There is another permutation; namely the role and input of prominent non-Tongan (palangi) regulars and moderators which cut across the altercations between diasporic and non-diasporic posters (for want of a better term). Two of the more regular and engaged participants in these debates are not Tongan although they have both lived and worked in Tonga. Nevertheless, despite some queries from others about their 'ethnic' legitimacy, their contributions are supported and acknowledged by the online constituency. Each has his online supporters who urge him on. Their arguments for and against the status quo provide a significant sub-thread in one discussion that is responded to as follows:

Greatly enjoyed reading both of your views, and I find it most interesting and rather flattering that you both apparently care enough about our little 'Piliote' [dot] in the Pacific to go into it with such passion and conviction (Tiana, 9/03/99) 109

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107 In Reply to Re: NO GRATUITOUS REASONING, PLEASE... posted by Sione Ake Mokofisi (15/09/98) on Weekly Discussion Topic #51, Democracy in Tonga: Pro or Con? (no longer on server)

108 There are a few exceptions (see Honi Soit above). See point 5 of the following manifesto for instance;
1. The King will be Constitutional Monarch.
2. Allow nobles to sit in a House of Lords WITHOUT ANY POWER,
3. Free elections of commoners to Parliament (PARLIAMENT RUN BY COMMONERS FREELY ELECTED)
4. All MINISTERS should apply for the job same as everyone else.
5. Women should own land same as men.
6. TONGAN PEOPLE SHOULD VOICE THEIR OPINIONS WITHOUT FEAR THAT THEY BE KICKED OUT FROM THEIR LAND. (POLITICAL CORRECTIONS MUST APPLY TO THE TONGAN LIFE, 13/02/98) in reply to: Re: DISCUSSION TOPIC #24 - ADHERENCE TO CHIEFLY AND ROYAL SUCCESSIONS (I guess you have no understanding whatsoever...nofo a, 13/02/98, no longer on server).

109 All in the name of the 'Kainga' in reply to Be Careful What Ya Pray For... (Sandy Mackintosh, 9/03/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10298.html. The sub-thread referred to was part of a long thread, WE, THE PEOPLE OF TONGA! (Ghost 5/03/99) at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10112.html. The debate between Sandy and George
How non-Tongans' opinions, especially when strongly pro-liberal democracy (George Chandler) or pro-Royalist (Sandy) are received is clear by direct follow-ups and also by other forms of online support such as welcome messages, and ongoing responses to their positions. It is all grist to the mill, part of an ongoing collective online archive and memory, as the follow-up to Tiana (above) shows:

I too have been following these posts with a great deal of interest and though I side more with George's and Tania's arguments. I am very impressed with Sandy's enthusiasm and eloquence. What a pity should these posts be lost in the Archives. A few points could be better documented and then this exchange would be the best this forum or others like it has had to offer. Thank you very much for your serious contributions.

(Pila 9/03/99) 110

The last situation is allowed for in a relatively inclusive internet/www setting such as these forums, for ongoing presence and participation are the earmarks of membership (Chapter Eight). But there are also forms of exclusion and silencings that come from diasporic economic disparities as much as political allegiances. A poster who posts as 'homeless' was shouted down when criticising the expenses involved in renovating the King's mansion in San Francisco by those who doubted his/her claim on a number of grounds, not the least being their having (public library) access to the internet.111 And then there are those who choose not to make their presence known by posting a message. Very difficult to gauge in any online scenario but there are signs and signals. Furthermore, public silence does not necessarily entail acquiescence. These online debates move in and out from a situation where, as Helu points out;

As far as Tongan culture is concerned, human beings are never born equal in dignity and rights because national and social origin, birth and wealth all feature in the social calculus that determines one's status in the community ...The upshot of the class struggle is all power concentrating in the chiefly class. Although in terms of the constitution the common people have been emancipated from the arbitrary authority of chiefs, the great legal chiefs of modern Tonga (instituted as hereditary titles in 1875) still exercise almost unlimited power over commoners by virtue of the culture which requires the latter to defer on all matters to their chiefly masters who are never to be questioned or criticised on any issue whatsoever. (Futa Helu 1999:34)

All in all, these specific situations and inter/subjective positions underscore my earlier point about the need to read/interpret/learn from such online interactions on several levels. Short retorts can outweigh measured arguments at times - as in the case of the importunate 'Homeless' - as participants are challenged to show their cultural and political credentials in a number of ways. And they do so with more or less success or panache. In short, whether threads become particularly long and intricate, are left hanging for lack of response, or a substantial sub-thread wends off in another direction, this does not mean that others are not listening in, following up

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Candler begins in reply to Re: WE, THE PEOPLE OF TONGA are OWNED BY A KING (Dave 5/03/99) in reply to Ghost's initial post, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10115.html.

110 Re: All in ...in reply to All in the name of the 'Kainga' (Tiana 09/03/99) in WE, THE PEOPLE OF TONGA/ thread, at http://pacificforum.com/kavabowl/kc/messages/10304.html

111 Homeless persists , and loudly - whence the capitals - however:

...AND I AM NOT LYING.....I CAME HERE TO THE US ON AN IMMIGRANT VISA BY MYSELF TRYING TO MAKE IT HERE.....LIFE IN TONGA IS NOT ALL COCONUT TREES AND BEAUTIFUL BEACHES.....WHY AM I A HOMELESS TONGAN? ITS BECAUSE I LIVE FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER TRYING TO FIND A BETTER JOB....I AM NOT OPPOSED TO THE KING....ALL IM TRYING TO SAY IS....HOW ABOUT THE POOR PEOPLE OF TONGA ? WHERE DOES ALL THIS MONEY COME FROM?.....CANT IT BE USED IN OTHER THINGS? (9/03/99, IF ONLY YOU WERE IN MY SANDALS YOU WOULD KNOW)

in reply to Re: You are confused HOMELESS and I think you're wasting your time posted by Nina Teu, 9/03/99) at http://pacificforum.com/ kavabowl/kc/messages/10318.html).
earlier posts, drawing their own conclusions. Which leads me to another recurring feature of online forums, especially those dealing with politically sensitive issues (Dai 2000). Such threads are characterised by a high degree of online anonymity, barring a few notable exceptions. I am not talking here about the many nicknames that assume a certain knowledge of who-is-who, or signatures that are continuations of non-de-plumes or the discussion itself but of those that both disguise and indicate allegiance. Nicknames such as Pure-Tongan, Ghost, Navigator, Ninja and sub-textual references - often in Tongan - in the 'posted by' place point to relationships and situations and also provide another 'textual surface'. It also bears noting that the founders of both the Kava Bowl and The Polynesian Cafe use software that permits anonymity, a controversial option at times but also an empowering one at others (Aiono 1999: interview).

Conclusion

Democracy is a delicate principle which by nature is simultaneously desirable, unstable and vulnerable....Living up to the basic demands of a democratic system, the public have the final say as to which crowd of hooligans shall control the government until the next elections. But economic and political stability has been assured because the same people [global business] have paid for both sides. Thus, regardless of which hooligans and bounders rule the country, the same interests shall continue to be both protected both at home and promoted abroad...(HRH Prince Tupouto'a: email, 7/06/99) 112

What we have seen at work in these threads is the sort of self-reflexive questioning and the inter/subjective situating in the histories and ongoing conversations (online and offline) with which it is interacting that is so often missing in debates on 'democracy', digital or otherwise. It is also missing in many of the celebrations - and lamentations - on the role of ICTs in enhancing participatory, deliberative, representative democratic politics, let alone what these constitute, whose interests they currently serve and how they (are to) operate for the good of all.

Two tentative, and interrelated conclusions can be drawn. The first pertains to the debates and the online practices of everyday life to which they belong. The second is on how these online articulations relate to the problematic relationship between (neo)liberal definitions of democracy, debates on whether the internet/www is/is not a 'democratic' means and medium and how both are being played out in a postcolonial diasporic context. These are linked, in turn, to the gendered and ethnic/race dimensions to self/group identity formation and concomitant political or sociocultural identification.

As in all debates about the rights and wrongs of (constitutional) monarchies and incumbent political elites, positions become quickly polarised. Loyalties are not always clearly split along class - status lines and historical interpretation play an important role in arguments for and against any change to the power, role and indeed existence of a royal house. This also holds true for the discussions on the Kava Bowl. Given the close social networks at home and abroad (churches, extended families, social networks of obligation) and the historical significance the of Tupou dynasty for the contemporary nation-state of Tonga, protest comes with a heavy historical payload. It would be easy for this reason to simply see these debates as a slanging match between 'conservative' defenders of the status-quo and 'modernising' advocates for change. Both sides are active in any one thread, get hot under the collar, are prone to rhetoric, non-sequiturs, personal attacks and quick to resort to historical 'fact' to back up their arguments.

But all this being so, and not forgetting that such behaviours are part and parcel of any intense or emotive debate, whether in Houses of Parliament/Representatives or internet discussion forums, these threads are not articulating a simple dichotomy. Re-presenting them as such would belie a much more complex set of issues. It would also elide some important (re)articulations of democracy in theory and practice let alone what it means in a postcolonial context. The latter concerns political and economic self-determination for indigenous populations, how to deal with change as an external imposition and/or an internal pressure vis-à-vis migratory and economic flows to and from the islands (Ward 1999). In these debates, it is

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112 In a later communication, Tupouto'a noted that "The above quote was just my attempt at putting humorously, that democracy is public choice and not a public lottery..." (email: 15/02/01)
not so-called conservative at-home traditionalists pitted against progressive/westernised expatriates, or a clearly cut non-democratic system versus a liberal ideal alternative. As many participants insist, Tonga is already a democracy of a particular sort. Not only is Tongan history - various versions thereof included - and that of the Pacific Islands in general since 'contact' at stake (Helu 1999: interview), but so also is the legitimacy and integrity of the current political system and its ruling elite. The upshot is a dilemma about "cultural survival" (Helu 1999b:10-17). On the one hand, political and social protest and agitation for change has to be thwarted if this means a loss of uniqueness, and economic control to the western powers-that-be. On the other hand, grinding corruption scandals and nepotism indicate a political elite that is being seriously questioned by a substantial part of its constituency. It is a tricky balancing act between change, preservation and self-determination for small political economies in a globally capitalist world. This is a common refrain from all sides of the debates.

As for the what being 'pro-democracy' actually means in Pacific Island contexts, as opposed to say China (Dai 2000), there are different permutations and expectations. For one, the Tongan Pro-Democracy Movement, both online and on the ground is not necessarily anti-royalty. But neither is it necessarily pro-western or pro-capitalist. It is, in one of its supporters own words, not looking for a full democratic system like the British system. The democracy we want is very Tongan. it uses the culture as it is. We want the King to be the king, like now, but we want the people below him to be more representative of the people (Fifita 2000)

Throughout the South Pacific contemporary political institutions are embedded in particular variations of a colonial past and a complex postcolonial present. Political culture, its practices and meanings figure literally and figuratively for the 'post-colonial body' (Wendt 1999, Hereniko 1999, Figure Eight). Western liberal democracy and economic values are contested - and contestable - concepts and institutions in a part of the world that has not only cosseted the 1980's neoliberal experiment par excellence of New Zealand (Kelsey 1997, Jesson 1999) but also a number of well-organised indigenous sovereignty political protest movements (Hawaii, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Fiji, Kanaky/New Caledonia). The upshot is that multifarious political movements for sovereignty and land rights (Aotearoa, Hawaii) and/or constitutions (Fiji), universal suffrage (Samoa) and democratic reform (Tonga) are linked with (post)colonial identity formation both in and out of diaspora. These both compete and intersect with various 'ideals of democracy', of human/indigenous rights, and the pressures being brought to bear on small island states by an 'open' global economy. These online deliberations, characterised by their intensity, length, and level of participation, show multivalent meanings and experiences of democracy in operation, (re)articulating them in turn.

These online political practices-in-the-making relate to the second conclusion. Namely, the attributed (in)efficacy of the internet/www for participation and/or consultation of those who, arguably, constitute the lifeblood of any political system - the people (Scott-Smith 2000). These threads show how there is more than one way to examine any incumbent or future political system's emotional identifications and political economic connections. There are also other historical and sociocultural experiences and inter/subjective positions from which to evaluate them. Political representational systems that are not generically western are an example of the first and their diasporas are of the second. The internet/www in its non-commercialised corners and public communicative practices is a third node. This is why I oppose blanket dismissals of the democratic potential of ICTs tout court, their critique of the inroads made by capitalist processes of commodification notwithstanding (Wilhelm 2000: 3-5, McChesney et al 1998). The Kava Bowl and Kamehameha Roundtable internet discussion forums are but two examples of the many corners of not-yet-corporatised cyberspace that still remain. The 'translocal' nature (Clifford 1997) of these online deliberations and controversies make nominally 'parochial' concerns and experiences access-able to broader debates. They also challenge 'us' to be more self-reflexive about our own cultural, ideological and emotional investments in any (postcolonial) politics of (democratic) representation. As for the challenges being wrought by ICTs to all of these, laments about

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A neo-colonial one in the case of French Polynesia and parts of Melanesia.
the potentially debilitating impact of rapid, telegraphic language on political discourse in the public sphere - not just the potential dearth of deliberation online but also the line of demarcation increasingly separating participants at the centre of information-age production from those persons on the margins (Wilhelm 2000:3)

are simply not borne out by the raison d'être and practices of these online forums. Neither does the high level of participation and commitment - over time - to the issues at hand, nor discussion content that is indeed "articulated and vocalised in a sustained and deliberative manner" (Wilhelm 2000:4) give grounds for these fears. Nevertheless, there is cause for concern about current on/offline tendencies in modern liberal democratic politics where grassroots concerns get "bent, repackaged, and delivered by political actors on their media stage or by accumulated economic interests..." (ibid). But to claim that political deliberation and/or decision-making is per se "undermined" (Wilhelm 2000:7 & 9) by the transmission speed of ICTs is going too far and denies the political agency and sophistication of non-elite users/uses. Moreover, such blanket condemnations of the internet/www reproduces the eurocentric determination of the problem and idealises another sociocultural status quo in turn. This supposedly endangered species of politics that can only live in a certain idealised and rarefied 'public sphere' (Wilhelm 2000:9) has many sociocultural, ethnic-class-gendered inequalities and exclusions of its own.

It does not suffice to assess a 'democratic deficit' in everyday practices online such as these by seeing how they line up with socioculturally specific democratic norms - of political representation, consensus formation, deliberation. Once again, this technologically deterministic conceptualisation of ICTs confines all solutions for all problems to western political concerns and conventions and then simply ups the moralistic ante. Such a notion of democracy "restricted to an analysis of its operation in the ... parliamentary sector of political dimensions" (van Meijl 1998:391) is easily threatened by the internet/www in this respect. Secondly, such a narrow definition belies the long-standing presence of more informal and less well-heeled grassroots and citizen-based uses of the ICTs, let alone spontaneous and informal everyday political practices and interventions. In the first instance (which is the focus here after all) there are online s(pl)aces for political agitation and autonomous discussion (Wilhelm 2000:9), that are still relatively open and non-commercialised loci for social and cultural contact and experimentations in inter/subjectivity, networks of community and support. As I have already mentioned, many participants post expressing their appreciation for this aspect and the two Tongan and Samoan (viz Polynesian) websites were also initially set up for this reason (Aiono 1999: interview, Kami 2001: interview). So counter to many sceptics, postcolonial diasporic internet communities and discussion forums are longstanding proponents of the very 'bottom-up' politics supposedly threatened by ICTs. Of course, these are not without their own political and cultural counter-resonances to established social and political hierarchies and sensibilities, both on the ground and in cyberspace.

To conclude and also provide a foretaste of the next chapters. The historical overlaps between these online debates about the meaning and practice of democracy and contemporary 'offline' critiques of the inroads ICTs are making into the same could be rendered as a contrived Kava Bowl interaction. The first 'poster', a (circumspect) supporter of a political 'status quo' under pressure from grassroots uses of ICTs, asserts that there is a profound disruption of political life by apparatuses such as computer networks and the Internet, not to mention the accelerated rhythms and speeds that inexorably accompany their introduction into society. With the growth of the Internet for example, the identifiable and stabilizing body politic and its buttresses in civil society become unmoored, the relation between deliberation and decision-making is unhinged, and the very concept of the political is appropriated and out to work to service [interests] rather than the interests of citizens... (Wilhelm 2000: 3-4, emphasis added)

On the other hand, the second ponders on the possibility for change in the light of the strategic operations of (colonial and local) power past and present. This interlocutor does not extrapolate the political economic - or technological - issues from the social, cultural or psychological complexity of life in postcolonial / democratic societies such as Tonga.
What does it mean to be a true/full Tongan? Would Tonga be 'Tonga' in the heart of it's people with a system other than the one that is currently in place? Did the system which is in place now destroy the original 'Tonga' that existed before then? Is being Tongan a variable or evolutionary condition? Does all this matter? Tongans in Tonga today still live by many of the freedoms and restrictions imposed on them by culture for centuries......... Palangi ideals may have been adopted, but the system that was created in the 1800's equally allowed the Tongan way of life and it's values to persist......... If a political system (monarchy, democracy, constitutional monarchy etc) can be viewed as a means to achieve a desired end, then the important question for Tonga is 'who has the right to decide what is best for Tonga', and having established that 'what do they want to achieve'. A system that is good for 'traditional Tongans' is a different thing from a system that is good for anyone else in the world, whatever their high ideals might be. ...... As for us overseas, when are we constructively helping, and when are we not? I personally believe that all humans are equal whatever their circumstance. In the past I have often found it difficult living in Tonga because at face value anyway, the classification of Tongan society makes equality not always apparent. But that doesn't give me much more than the right to simply express myself and respect another persons right to likewise do as they will. At the end of the day whatever system Tongans in Tonga choose for themselves, I hope it continues to preserve the high level of tranquility and contentment that has always been a part of 'Tongan living, even before the palangi came, and much more so than for most other societies in this world, whether democratic or not. I hope that is something that is obvious to everyone concerned. (Jamie, 12/09/98)

Despite their local and historical specificity, these intense debates and the fact that they are occurring in cyberspace where incumbent power elites and social conventions can be bypassed (to a certain extent) intersect with issues around the rights and wrongs of (online) behaviour postcolonial and/or online public spaces and places. When the disparate, albeit related, Pacific Island communities (Morton 1996: 20-22) come together in these open (cyber)spaces and places, their everyday lives, experiences of discrimination and/or empowerment from inside and outside their immediate surroundings, and their ideals for the future start to mix and mingle in new ways. This will be made more clear in the next chapter.

114 This is taken from a lengthy intervention in the even lengthier thread, Weekly Discussion Topic #51: Democracy in Tonga: Pro or Con? (no longer on server). The follow-ups were roughly half for and half against. It covered a period of nearly 3 weeks (7/09/98 - 25/09/98). Granted, the male posters outnumbered the female.

115 Taholo Kami has found himself being pressed by representatives of the Tongan government authorities to reveal the whereabouts (by tracing the email address back to its source) of a 'known' pro-democracy agitator participating in these debates. He did not - could not - oblige (Kami 2001: interview).
The photo for this poster, advertising an exhibition held during the 1999 Holland Festival, was taken in New Zealand by a Dutch photographer, Hans Neleman. It is a contemporary example of the Maori *moko* - facial tattoo. More and more New Zealand Maori men and women are having this ancient form of tattooing done. The tattoo is permanent, and striking. Another level of (self) representation operates when the *moko* is combined with the attire of the 'young urban professional', as is the case in this shot. See Chapter Seven for more on these complex dynamics of chosen and acquired everyday embodiments.

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1 See Wendt (1999) on Samoan forms of body tattooing, and Teaiwa (1999) for a critical review of artistic (re)presentations of (pre/post) colonial Polynesian women's bodies. See Figure One.