

The Making of TONGAN SAINTS: LEGACY OF FAITH

by
Eric B. Shumway

Tongan Saints: Legacy of Faith is a work that was commissioned by the Tongan Centennial Committee in November of 1988 when I was still mission president of the Tonga Nuku'alofa mission. It was to be a labor of love that would include extensive gathering of oral history, especially from the Tongans themselves. The project would eventually involve dozens of helpers, missionaries, former missionaries, and local Tongans.

The plan almost from the beginning, thanks to some sound advice from interested friends and scholars, members and non-members, was to feature the Tongans themselves, to illustrate a hundred years of their faith and faithfulness. Most of the history of the Church in the South Pacific has been written by caucasians (*pālangis*) about caucasians, with information derived from records and journals kept by caucasians, or from interviews with caucasian leaders, former caucasian leaders, or caucasian missionaries to those areas.

Tongan Saints: Legacy of Faith offers center stage to the Tongan people. It is not a history *per se*. It does not follow a chronology of dates and events. Rather it is a compilation of personal experiences and testimonies of ordinary men and women who have been a living part of the Church's history in the Friendly Islands. In their own voices they tell of courage and conversion, endurance, priesthood power, visions, sacrifice, obedience, testimony revelation, and the love of God and man. These are personal statements that give substance and meaning to the dates and events marking the growth of the Church in each generation. Together they capture the essence of faith among some of the Church's most faithful and lovable people in the world.

As editor and chief translator for the project, my task has been to review these histories and translate into English those portions which seemed appropriate for the inclusion in this commemorative volume. I have endeavored to be faithful to the original accounts, if not in precise word for word renditions, then always in the spirit of the intended meaning.

When I was first asked in November of 1988 by the Tongan Centennial Committee to write a commemorative history for the Church's

100th anniversary, the members of the committee had no idea what they were asking. They were simply dividing up the responsibilities around the room. "We'll ask Shumway to do the history," said Tevita Ka'ili, chairman of the committee. I was the only one in the circle who knew something of what was ahead of me. But when the decision was made to gather oral histories and compile spiritual highlights of the Tongans themselves, I felt a great burst of enthusiasm for the project. My first task was to explain to the Tongan saints the nature of the project, persuade the Tongan Church leadership to support it, not just with words of encouragement, but with their own accounts. I personally contacted each stake president, and went over with him the entire project from initial gathering of information to the final published book. Once the stake presidents were persuaded and accepted the responsibility of telling wonderful stories of their own, it was a simple matter of setting up stake firesides, inviting all of the Saints in each stake to attend for the purpose of learning how to write personal history, or in their case, to dictate it onto an audiotape.

I conducted each fireside, making the opening presentation in which I described the project and explained some of the nitty-gritty about dictating histories, which would alert them to the value of such a task despite all of the attendant problems they would encounter. Of course, for a Tongan who is already programmed by his culture to be immensely verbal, and a master at story telling, there is a clear need to conscientiously discriminate between *mo'oni* (truth) and *mālie* (splendid, exciting, interesting). A good story excellently told is one of the treasures of the Tongan society and the ability to embellish a story is one of the cultivated arts of a highly articulate oral culture. One's position in society and reputation among friends and family are linked to one's powers of language. There is a saying common among Tongan raconteurs: "*Neongo 'ene loi, kae kehe ke mālie* (Never mind if it's a lie, just so it's splendidly told).

Frankly, I had a lot of fun describing and demonstrating the difference between truth and splendid story telling, but at the same time showing how both could enhance each other. I also explained the need to include local color, the sunshine and shadow of life in the Church and in the Tongan village. I showed them how to organize basic biographical information on a sheet that I passed around. This sheet would accompany the tapes on which the histories were recorded. I showed them also how

to organize an outline that would allow them to move from point to point. I knew it would be impossible to thoroughly train interviewers, but my hunch proved true that once the Tongans could hear an explanation of what was wanted as well as several examples, they would produce some excellent material. After my opening presentation in each fireside, I had four or five people representing a cross-section of the stake tell of poignant or otherwise significant experience from their own histories which I recorded on the spot. Thus, I was able to capture the experiences, and these experiences in turn served as models for the rest of the Saints.

After the fireside in each of the stakes, it was a matter of prodding and encouraging leaders and heads of families to get the work done. When the tapes began to come into the mission office, I called as many as four full-time sister missionaries to move into the office complex and do nothing but transcribe oral history tapes and type them into a working manuscript. I personally recorded the histories of many of the prominent leaders and older Saints. Once the manuscripts were produced, it was a matter then of going through each history and selecting those portions that seemed to best represent the person, and would also be of most interest and inspiration to a reader from any culture.

One of the things I tried to prevent among my informants was any tendency to exploit or aggrandize a spiritual story. With almost every account, I tried to get a second or third witness to a particularly dramatic spiritual experience, or at least to go back to the person and quiz him or her in depth regarding that experience. When I began to translate into English the selected excerpts from each of the oral histories, I made an effort to keep the spirit as well as the accuracy of the original Tongan account. In almost every case, after completing the translation, I was able to return to the author and verify the major points, explaining what I was saying in English as a representation of what he or she said in Tongan. This exercise provided me with an important comfort level that the final published product would be indeed actual history.

My "favorite" story and a favorite of many others with whom I have shared these historical vignettes was not included in the final list of vignettes for publication. The reason was I simply could not feel comfortable about it. When I contacted the author again, there was just enough doubt in my mind that I determined to run down another person mentioned in the account, to ask her to verify certain portions of the history. I finally located her in San Francisco, after many telephone calls.

Her memory of the events did not include certain dramatic elements which were the features of the story told by the other informant. She said it must have been someone else with the informant at the time, not her. I was then faced with the decision of publishing their "wonderful" story, taking a chance on the veracity of the teller or putting it aside because the second witness was very tentative, at best. I decided not to include the story, and have been grateful ever since.

I have gone through quite a few oral histories produced in an interview situation. Some of them are very good, but many of them reflect an intrusiveness on the part of the interviewer that in my mind makes the final product less valuable, and certainly less readable. Let your informant talk!

Just before we left the mission field in June of 1989, I asked a group of eight sister missionaries, many of whom had helped with the transcription, go through all of the histories and bracket out stories and vignettes they considered important for me to look at. I worked out a score sheet of sorts, listing perhaps twenty tapes of accounts that they might encounter, and asked them to rate each one from one to five, one being absolutely important to use, and five being good enough to look at it. Thus, of the 250 or so histories I brought back with me from Tonga, each one had an initial grading from 1 to 5 that would guide my own search. I learned very quickly that as valuable and time-saving as this technique was, the sisters did not catch the significance of some accounts which were loaded with local color, interesting personalities, and profound insights.

When I arrived at BYU-Hawaii, I was able to engage the services of Uinisē Langi, who became a point person in reading through many of the histories, contacting major families who had submitted no materials, ferreting out representative photographs, and helping me make sense out of difficult passages.

As I reflect back on the encounters with many of the wonderful Tongan informants, I'm struck by the way we recorded the history of Moleni Fonua. I arranged to bring his entire family, children and grandchildren, to the little mission house in Ha'apai. We sat around in a family home evening circle where he dictated his history as if he were passing it on directly to his children. His children in turn asked questions about things they remembered, which Moleni would then elaborate on. Then each of the children at the conclusion gave a eulogy of the parents,

describing in some detail their favorite remembrances about Dad and Mom, and the experiences of their family. This technique, by the way, was especially effective when I did the oral history of Tēvita Muli Kinikini. In the responses of the children to the memory of their parents, they included many valuable accounts that Brother Kinikini had missed in his history.

The overriding collective theme of these historical accounts is profound religious faith. It is faith motivated and sustained by an assurance that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is in very fact the only "true and living church" on the face of the earth. As Patriarch Mosese Muti records: "This knowledge is as much a part of me as my right hand and my left hand, even as my whole body."

The authors of these vignettes out of history come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences spanning four generations. Some are university graduates with degrees in medicine and educational administration, while others are subsistence farmers who never studied beyond primary school. Some joined the Church in their young adulthood, some in their late seventies. Others have been nurtured in the faith from childhood. Several were respected leaders in other churches before they were baptized, well acquainted with the Bible. Others had little formal religious training whatsoever. Several persecuted the Church, then, like Paul the Apostle, became eloquent defenders of it. A few are young returned missionaries, others are long deceased, speaking from generations of the past. They are chiefs, housewives, accountants, teachers, businessmen, fishermen, students, bakers, policemen, carpenters, mechanics, and district officers. All of them speak in the same irresistible spirit of faith and testimony.

I will now share with you translations of excerpts from the histories of three women, Sālote Wolfgramm, Sālome 'Ulu'ave, and Sela Tāfisi, whose husband Sifa shares her narrative:

Sālote

I was born on June 27, 1915, and was still a tiny baby when my mother, Seluvaia Mafi Fakatou, passed away. On her deathbed she asked my father's sister, 'Amelia 'Ofa, to care for me as her own child. As did many Tongan mothers in those days who were unable to nurse their children, 'Amelia chewed my food thoroughly, mixing it with her own saliva, and let me suckle

from her mouth. That is what kept me alive until I was old enough to eat on my own. When 'Amelia 'Ofa and her husband Kaliopasi Vaitai moved to Pukotala to care for Vaitai's mother, I was given to my grandparents, Teleita and Fakatou, in Felemea. I never longed for my poor dead mother because of so many living parents in our society.

An active member of the Tonga Free Church, Teleita was a very strong woman. One of the powerful images indelibly etched in my memory is of her kneeling by her bed in her private prayers. Sometimes she would disappear during the day, and, in a child's panic, I would search all over for her and finally find her in her room praying aloud. I was the subject of many of her prayers. As I knelt by her, she would ask God to make me a fine and virtuous woman one day. From Teleita I learned the value of offering many private prayers to Heavenly Father, day and night

I was baptized in Makeke on March 18, 1928. Grandmother Teleita took it hard, but my real father wrote me and said, "I have authority over your physical body, not over your spiritual self. If you feel this church will bring salvation to your soul, then so be it." I was overjoyed

Life was both difficult and joyful as a boarding student at Makeke. Our diet was boiled *manioke* (cassava or tapioca root), day in and day out. Occasionally there would be boiled plantains. Actually, we made this fare quite exciting by persuading someone to run down to the ocean and bring back sea water in a bottle. This became our dipping sauce. The salt water gave the *manioke* a taste we all thought heavenly. One day our boys spotted a small herd of wild pigs while we were digging up clumps of grass in the bush to plant in the barren yards of Makeke. We all gave chase, the boys running ahead and the girls following behind, baying like hounds. The shotgun blast made us squeal with delight, knowing we would actually have real meat on our table for once. In fact, the students' portion was ever so small, but still we thought we were in heaven, savoring every piece of skin, every bone, indeed, every morsel

My marriage with 'Iohani Wolfgramm is what you would call a whirlwind romance and wedding, but it had the approval of both of our families. I first laid eyes on him on a Friday and we were married the following Wednesday. I had gone to Vava'u with a student performing group from Makeke, as part of the mission conference of 1933. I performed several numbers and directed a choir piece composed by Siale Sanft, a tribute to Joseph Smith. I knew 'Iohani's sister, Ella, slightly but had never seen him until Heleine Fakatou, Samuela's wife, told me 'Iohani wanted to speak with me.

"Why have I not seen him with the other youth of Vava'u?" I inquired. "Well," she said, "'Iohani is a serious chap and has spent most of his time with the older men who are preparing the food or organizing the conference programs."

I agreed to talk to him and found out very quickly for myself just how serious a young man he was. We had not talked long before he said, "Sālote, I really want you to marry me!"

"What?" I cried, "We have barely met and you want to marry me? Please give me time to think."

It was more than just thinking. I fasted and prayed, sought counseling from my uncle Samuela Fakatou. I was touched by 'Iohani's sincerity and so were Samuela and Heleine. Sunday I fasted again while 'Iohani pressed his case more fervently. I told him I needed more time. On Monday our group which was staying in Neiafu went to Ha'alaufuli to perform. By now I had done much praying and decided that I would devise a way (*talotalo*) the Lord could answer me. I decided that, when our group arrived at Ha'alaufuli, if the first person I saw was a young unmarried person, then I should marry 'Iohani. If that person were an older married person, then that would be a sign I should not marry him. Well, the first person I saw when we arrived was 'Iohani himself, carrying a load of firewood.

The marriage arrangements were formalized the next day when 'Iohani's mother, Sālome, and stepfather, Siosifa Naeata, met with Samuela and Heleine Fakatou, my guardians; and on Wednesday, July 13, 1933, we were married.

This kind of marriage arrangement was not uncommon in the Church at that time since it was vital that church marriages occur as much as possible. For a girl to marry outside of the Church meant her almost certain loss to church activity. . . . (Tongan Saints, 82-85)

Salome

But then our trials began, along with a profound shift in our lives to the gospel of Christ and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

On the 4th of March, 1944, when our youngest son, Pita Seti, was eight months old, I became extremely ill, so ill that everyone thought I was going to die. The medical officer in the island said my blood level was critically low and that all that could be done was for me to eat good food. In providing the best we had, we gradually killed off all of our animals. My condition continued to deteriorate rapidly, and my death seemed inevitable. Solo moved me into a little hut on his parent's lot, and there they cared for me, waiting for my approaching death.

As I lay there, drifting in and out of a coma, I was aware of things around me, including the family discussions of my funeral arrangements. I could see the rock slabs my husband Solo had painstakingly chipped out of the lava cliffs by the ocean to wall the sides of my grave. On the beams right above my bed were rolls of Tongan *koloa*, fine mats and *tapa* cloths which would decorate my funeral bier.

It was precisely then that a Mormon missionary, Semisi Nukumovaha'i Tonga, known as Vaha'i, visited us. He told us he possessed special authority from the Lord to heal the sick. He said I would get well through a priesthood blessing which he would bestow. He talked of a great work remaining for me to accomplish. Solo agreed to the blessing only as he might agree to a doctor's last-resort offer to help me. I knew too well his negative feelings about the Mormons.

On Tuesday, March 13, 1944, Vaha'i, the Mormon missionary, and his wife, Sela, came to give me the blessing,

saying that they were fasting for me as well. Vaha'i anointed me and pronounced the blessing in the name of Jesus Christ and by the authority of the holy priesthood of God.

The next day, Wednesday, March 14th, word was sent out to all of my extended family to assemble, because it was not likely I would survive the day. My family arrived all dressed for the funeral, wearing traditional black mourning clothes and heavy waist mats. The little house I lay in was packed with people. Some wailed loudly, others moaned soft and low.

The Wesleyan minister and the congregation from our parish were also there. After singing and saying last rites over me, the minister turned to my husband and said, "Solo, be strong! Let Sālome go! The winds seem to be blowing right, so let her go!" (*"Ngali matangi lelei ke 'alu ai leva ho mali"*).

Solo hated to hear those words and kept quiet, for he did not want to accept the inevitable.

At that very moment, Vaha'i Tonga came in. He had heard what the Wesleyan minister had said. Making his way over to my bed he said, "Solo, be comforted! Sālome will not die. There is still so much left for her to do."

The presence of the Mormon missionary in this setting caused a stir in the congregation. For him to say I was going to live provoked an angry outcry from the people. Vaha'i spoke as one having authority, and the people considered it an affront to their minister whose word they revered. In their anger and frustration, they all departed from the house, some kicking and hitting the walls as they left. They seemed to say with one voice, "If your Jesus is true and ours false, let your Jesus heal her. We're rid of her." Even my own mother packed her things and left. The only persons who stayed behind were my maternal grandmother, Solo, and the Mormon missionary.

When everybody had left, Vaha'i again said, "Solo, Sālome will not die. She has been blessed and been given a promise through the holy priesthood that she will live. There is still much she has to do in this world."

He came over to my bed and whispered to me, "Sālome, do not fear for your life! We are still fasting for you."

This was the second day of their fasting. I was deeply moved by this show of compassion from a man who hardly knew me. The fact that he wouldn't let me die, even when my own mother and everyone else had left me, filled my heart with a wonderful warmth and love. This warmth started spreading throughout my lifeless body, driving out the coldness of death.

The next day, Friday, March 16th, I felt strong enough to get out of bed and crawl around the house. I had such an overwhelming love for the Mormon missionaries that more than anything else, I wanted to see them, to be one with them. I knew absolutely that I had been miraculously healed through the power of God and was determined to become a member of his church.

One week later I asked Solo to take me back to our home. I told him of my faith in the Mormon Church and asked for permission to be baptized. (Tongan Saints, 119-120)

Sifa and Sela Tafisi

Sifa

Our joining the Church was a happy but traumatic time for our family. It was difficult also for some people at our village. We experienced persecution from many sides but felt and still feel a fullness of joy in our membership in the Church. . . .

Sela

The pressure from this animosity made us all a little jumpy. It seemed we had no more friends. We talked a lot about the possibilities of what else might happen to us.

One night in February of 1961, I dreamed a strange dream, arising probably from our fears about the threats from people of the village. In the dream, I saw massive waves sweeping to engulf our little house. To my shock it was not ocean water but blood.

My heart sank as I witnessed our home disappear under these waves of blood. The thought occurred to me: "We've joined the wrong Church. We are going to be killed."

But then when I looked again, our hut was still intact, being elevated above the flood by four corner posts. When I looked even closer, they were not wooden posts at all holding up our home, but four men, the very four missionaries who had taught us the gospel.

When I awoke and related the dream to Sifa, he simply said, "Don't worry. If the blood represents some scheme to murder us, the holy priesthood of God will save us."

Two weeks later, on the second Sunday, I think, of March 1961 an attempt was made to take our lives.

Sifa

On that Sunday evening about nine o'clock, just after we got home from church in Latai, our oldest daughter told us our dogs had been barking furiously for a long time as if someone had come into the yard. The children were nervous and frightened especially when Viliami, our number three child, told me he had actually overheard two men talking at the beach across the road about blowing the Tāfisi family to bits.

I assured them there was nothing to worry about, that the Lord would protect those who believed and were baptized in his church. At that very instant, our dogs began to bark wildly again and a crude home-made bomb - two sticks of dynamite packed into a large cocoa tin - fell into our doorway.

Acting reflexively, I pushed Sela and my oldest daughter to the floor just as the bomb exploded. It reduced the door to dust and shattered the glass bottles Sela used to decorate the front of our home. The force of the blast and the flying glass passed just over our heads as we lay on the floor, ripping to shreds the clothes hanging on the wall.

As we struggled to recover from the shock and the smoke, a second bomb was thrown into the room. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to grab it and throw it back out the door before it exploded.

The second explosion rocked all of Nuku'alofa, but by now I was out of the house and on the trail of the two fleeing culprits. Following them in the dark was easy because one of the men still carried the burning piece of *tapa* cloth with which they had lighted the fuses.

I pursued them deliberately from a distance until finally the burning *tapa* fragment fell to the earth and the men disappeared. It was still aglow when I picked it up.

Interestingly the *tapa* fragment had been cut from the end of a larger piece of *tapa* with the name of its maker still visible on the unburned portion. . . .

I took this piece of evidence and returned home, feeling calm and thankful. We didn't have to call the police. They came to us, and so did everyone else. I think the people were filled with awe that such a powerful blast had not hurt any of us. One woman, by the name of Sātua, was so moved by this miracle she said she knew the Church was true. In fact, we baptized her shortly afterward.

Two persons were arrested that night and charged with attempted murder. The young boy served one year, the man seven years in prison. Upon his release, he came back to the community where to this day we greet each other in friendship. There is no outward animosity between us, and we never bring up the past.

The Church in Kolomotu'a has grown since that time from a little Sunday School held in our hut to three wards and hundreds of Saints. We cherish our testimony and our membership in the only true and living church on the face of the earth. The dynamite incident only increased our courage and magnified our faith. (Tongan Saints, 217-220)

May the power of these stories not only lift us in our personal struggles with faith, but also inspire us with the drive to write our own histories. Thank you and aloha.