PROBLEMS IN ORAL HISTORY IN TONGA
by
Eric B. Shumway
BYU-Hawaii Campus

Aloha! My purpose today is to discuss some of the practical and cultural problems facing those who attempt to gather oral history in Tonga. My remarks are based largely on experience and inference rather than on any study of mine about how to write history. I am not presuming that my ideas have not been mentioned before elsewhere. They may have. I have simply discovered them on my own in the field. I have no bibliography to offer. My focus is on Tonga, but what I say about Tonga is true of many other areas of the Pacific.

At the outset, I would like to say that my attachment to the language and people of Tonga is much more than intellectual curiosity or professional high seriousness. Much of what I am today owe to the experiences I had as a missionary in Tonga for 1½ years (from 1959 to 1962), as a member of a Peace Corps training team in 1967 and 1968, and as a student of Tongan oral culture from 1973 to the present. I love Tonga, I love the Tongan people, and I am deeply concerned that they preserve and promulgate the best of their culture. I want to declare my love for Tonga in the beginning simply because it won't fit anywhere else in my talk, and there will be moments when I may sound a little blunt, even disrespectfully critical of some of the forces in people that make oral research very difficult in Tonga. But I suspect that the pitfalls I discuss in gathering oral history will reflect upon the researcher himself as much as upon the subjects of his searching.

The historian Will Durant says that "Human history is a brief spot in space, and its first lesson in modesty." I would like to say that a preeminent characteristic of the researcher or historian is modesty.

I am still amazed at the number of writers about Tonga, even in the Church, who assume a hardened all-knowingness which stops informative discussion rather than solicits it—the insistence, for example, of some non-LDS scholars that there isn't the slightest possibility that there were any migrations into Polynesia from ancient America, and the equally implicable insistence of some members of the Church that all the ancestors of the Polynesians could have come from nowhere else. My first encounter with this closed-minded arrogance was in 1962 on the top deck of the copra boat Tofua, which made its monthly rounds throughout southern Polynesia. I was waving goodbye to many friends and saints after having completed 2½ years of missionary service among the Tongan people. I stood next to a bearded, contemplative man with a pipe, who after watching my sentimental exchanges with the people made a comment about their childlike simplicity and their primitive mentality. When I suggested something quite the contrary he looked at me down his nose and said, "My young man, this is my third circuit on the Tofua to these islands. I ought to know what I'm talking about." My two and a half years among the Tongan people and my fluency in the language could not stir him from his own authoritative opinions. But I have found the same rigidity in others, from government officials, to graduate students spending six months in Tonga writing a dissertation, to Peace Corps volunteers who spent their entire tenure railing against Tonga's rules on the Sabbath and the sovereignty of the chiefly class in Tonga.

Another pitfall, in my judgment, is the lack in most researchers of skill in the Tongan language. What is so abundantly self-evident to me is apparently lost on some gatherers of knowledge about Tongans, namely the fact that without an adequate command of the language it is most difficult to gather the right information, evaluate it, compare it with other gathered data, and then
see to it that the proper record is made. Because a larger population of Tongans can now communicate somewhat in English, and because at every turn there are willing informants and interpreters who for a couple of palanga will extract the "best information you ever heard" out of any informant, too many researchers consider that there are valid trade-offs for fluency in the language. Knowledgeable and honest interpreters are one of the endangered species of this world. At least they are in Tonga. More than one serious researcher has been embarrassed by the improvising of his interpreter, and it is not simply because the interpreter is a dishonest fellow, or in some cases that he is not trained in historical investigation. In many cases it is simply because he is programmed by certain cultural forces which will color, perhaps even distort, his information. These cultural forces may be anything from an overbearing national pride to a chiefly party line which must be followed.

Yet, on the other hand, I do not believe that it is realistic to expect every researcher of Tongan history and culture to become as fluent in the Tongan language as his own. But he ought to be conversant and knowledgeable. The real answer to this problem is to carefully train competent Tongans in both the ethics and the methodology of historical research. To my knowledge we do not have a single Tongan historian in the Church.

Certainly another pitfall of some researchers is the desire to sensationalize, to exploit a Church stereotype of the "sweet, simple faith" of the Tongan people. The Tongans themselves take great delight in feeding this stereotype. Anybody with a nose for a spiritual story will be amply accommodated by Tongan saints. The "beautiful people syndrome" permeates much of what is still written about Tonga. The suggestion is that their simplicity of material life means that therefore they are more happy, loving, moral, and therefore righteous than other people. This may not be true; in fact, it is blatantly untrue in many cases. The desire to record a "crackin' good story" is not just a weak of the researcher himself; in fact, he is encouraged and abetted in that was by the Tongans. The cultural forces which drive one to want to tell a great story are endless, and you cannot live very long in Tonga without being infected by them. A famous Tongan proverb capsulates the problem: "Koonga 'ane loi ke hehe ke māfia." (Even though it's a lie, just so it is splendid.)

In other words, the struggle to be objective in dealing with Tongan materials is twice as difficult simply because the recounting of history, personal or otherwise, is a form of oratory, and oratory never was, in Tonga, supposed to be a medium of objective, factual truth, but rather of splendid entertainment and ingenious metaphor which may or may not touch on a higher philosophical truth.

I do not hesitate myself to admit that although I cherish my missionary journal and consider it a very valuable document, my enjoyment of reading about past experiences is somewhat tainted by a residual suspicion that I may have embellished an account which really needed no embellishment. I am sure that more than one returned missionary has passed for truth what is really fiction or at least wishful inference.

All of this perhaps leads us to a more detailed consideration of using Tongan informants as resources of information, whether they be Church members discussing Church-related topics, or any Tongan discussing his culture. I will touch briefly on certain cultural forces which may impinge upon the veracity of his information. First of all, beware of anyone who poses as an expert on Tongan language and culture. The first sign that you've probably got a dud when he announces that he can tell you more about Tongan culture and history than anyone else, and that it will be unbiased and uncluttered by official protocol I'm thinking of the relatively large numbers of Tongans who hang around the Fateline Hotel and ply, with fairly good English, those visitors who claim
they want to know about Tonga. Many of these Tongans are displaced persons, aliens in their own culture, who have been educated out of the bush, but because of lack of connections or title have not assumed any of the positions they covet in the government or society, but who are willing, again, to rescue any bright-eyed graduate student or story-hungry foreign correspondent with all sorts of tales and authoritative pronouncements. In the Church we have these kinds of people, who love to sit with newly arrived missionaries or teachers and tell them at length about Tonga. I am not saying that a lot of good information cannot come from these people; I am suggesting, along with Thomas Babington Macaulay, that we simply maintain a healthy, "watchful and searching skepticism."

Again, in using a Tongan informant, one must beware of what I have described as the "creative memory." We must remember that many Tongans would rather die than say, "I don't know." It is a form of severe humiliation to have to admit ignorance about anything that is supposed to be Tongan. It is a loss of what the Tongans call personal agela, or glory and self respect. The informant's greatest desire will be in satisfying you. He cannot imagine that a "no" answer, or an "I don't know" answer will satisfy anybody. Occasionally I have had a very well-informed Tongan tell me he didn't know something and doubted that anyone else knew, but then the next day he gave me a magnificent answer to my particular question. Some informants, even those with high integrity, will sometimes deliberately give false information, simply because of a cultural notion that it is better for you to have a good story, simply because it will satisfy you, than to tell the truth and you not have a story at all—that is, you and your happiness in having something is more important than the truth.

Another problem occurs when you have rival informants, or when you try to check the veracity of one by asking another. Sometimes you find both are feeding you a line. Perhaps the most articulate, and certainly the most interesting Tongan authority alive today is Semisi Iongi, with whom I sat for many hours discussing many aspects of the Tongan language and culture. But with nearly every question I would put to him he would slyly ask, "Well, now what did Ve'ehala say?" or, "Now what was Malukava's explanation on that point?" I got the distinct impression that I had fallen into a competition among authorities on Tongan oral culture. Mr. Iongi was determined not to be outdone by Ve'ehala or Malukava.

Another related problem which is, in my judgment, a serious obstacle to the gathering of objective and true history in Tonga results from the kinds of communications which are culturally enforced between the various castes in Tongan society. From the time a Tongan is born he is imbued with a sense of rank and a sense of propriety in how to communicate with people of higher rank. In every group, no matter how small or informal, the sense of rank dictates the kind of communication that he will express. It is a matter of social survival to become skilled in the language of fakahikihiki, or formalized praise. The tendency to aggrandize those of higher rank becomes second nature to the traditionally instructed Tongan. Therefore, to be objective, low key, and frank is to be in direct opposition to the cultural insistence that you aggrandize, embellish, or fakahikihiki (exalt) those above you, namely, your sister and her children, your family, your parents, your village, your village chief, your village history, your family history, your ancestors—that is, you are not truly Tongan unless you elevate all of these to a stature larger than objective truth.

Again, many of the subjects that a historian would be interested in are the very core of one of the most important of the Tongan performing arts, namely formal oratory. An orator or recouncer does not win his reputation by sticking to strict references of verifiable historical facts, but rather by creating ingenious embellishments, variations of and additions to the facts. So what
you have in Tonga are living, evolving histories and stories—all the better for us who are interested in the poetics of oral culture, but all the more frustrating for the historian who wants only the facts.

Again, the embellishment is to exult not just the subject but the listening audience as well. This is why some of your best informants in Tonga are women who do not have to maintain a public image of a brilliant orator. They seem to manipulate the truth for their own sake less than do men. My own children have recognized the Tongan desire to please the listener more than to tell the truth. Last Monday night we had the express privilege of having in our home for a family home evening one of my former missionary companions, who is approaching his 80th birthday (his name is Kinikini), to whom I owe much of what I know about the Tongan language and custom. When I announced to the children that he was coming and would be giving our family home evening lesson, which I would translate for them, Aaron, my youngest boy, said, "I know, Daddy. All he'll do is come over and brag about how good a missionary you were."

Startled by this realistic assessment of the Tongan nature, I determined to listen objectively to Nulli's stories. Painfully I had to conclude what Huck Finn said about Mark Twain's account of Tom Sawyer: "Mr. Twain told the truth, mainly, with some stretchers, as I said before."

And then you have the opposite problem with many very valuable informants, which is the hiding or withholding of information simply because certain knowledge about their family and culture is precisely what gives them prestige and power in the society. To divulge that information would, in a sense, be a relinquishment of prestige. Sometimes prestige is simply knowing that you have an understanding that no one else in the Kingdom has. This was precisely the response to me of the high chiefly attendant Leaha'uli when he told me how he chuckles with self satisfaction every time he hears the honorable Ve'etela, the recognized authority on Tongan culture, give a discourse over the radio. He said, "That youngster just doesn't know what he's talking about."

Leaha'uli is a formidable orator at any social gathering that requires formal repartee among the high chiefly attendants or spokesmen. He does not want beforehand to share all his ammunition in private. He prefers to wait for the appropriate public moment in which he can resolve an argument, vanquish an opponent, or become the final word in a discussion. Up until I talked to him last (three years ago) he had consistently refused to give information about Tongan culture to the Tongan Traditions Committee, the official government organization for the gathering and preservation of Tongan oral culture. I do hope that he has since relented.

A variant to the person who wants to hide or withhold certain information for personal status reasons is the person who deliberately tries to suppress certain kinds of information that may seem to reflect negatively on the Tongan character. There are some, usually very reliable Tongan informants, who insist that cannibalism was never practiced in Tonga, in spite of the fact that there is abundant recorded evidence to the contrary. When I asked one informant about the ancient practice of wha'ofa, namely the bringing of a young to the king's compound to have a baby by him and thus elevate her family to a higher rank, he simply said, "There is no good reason to repeat that information anywhere in print. We don't want people to think the worst of our ancient monarchy."

Another obstacle for some researchers in Tonga is the problem of authority—who said what, when, where. There is among Tongans an irresistible tendency to ascribe their knowledge or information to a person of high rank, usually Queen Salote. They put into the mouths of princes and kings things that they never said. This appeal to authority is partly done in an effort to silence questioners or critics. If Queen Salote really conceived every wise saying and aphorism and proverb ascribed to her she would indeed be the Tongan Solomon. Queen Salote has become, in the memories of the people,
the embodiment of all that is beautiful, intelligent, praiseworthy, and of

good report of the Tongan people. While this may be a worthy memorial to
Queen Sālote, it does open the door for further exaggeration and closes the
door of further searching and verifying. It also becomes a form of
tyranny upon other informants who have excellent information but who will
always defer to authority and will bow humbly before the memory shadow
of Queen Sālote.

There is no question that Queen Sālote is the greatest Tongan poet and
philosopher of the 20th century, but her awesome rhetorical powers and her
vast reservoir of information were garnered from many other people
whom she would bring to her palace to live with her while she heard their
stories and histories and made their knowledge her own. But now few in Tonga
will presume to comment, much less challenge, anything in the large corpus of
poetic works that Queen Sālote left as part of her inheritance to the people.

I shall never forget my disappointment several years ago when I organized
a large kava party and invited some of the finest poets and commentators
on Tongan oral culture to attend. My purpose was to distribute copies of
several of Queen Sālote's poems and ask these men in the friendliness of
our kava circle to elucidate and interpret the Queen's poetry. I was astonished
at their reticence, and all of my prodding could not provoke any one of them
to venture forth with anything more than the largest, most obvious generalizations
about Queen Sālote's poetry. I plied them with kava, cake, and boiled bananas
to no avail, until one of them addressed me in a rather formal way saying,
"Faivaoa, you should know why none of us can speak about our Queen's poetry.
It is not for us to presume any kind of interpretation of her writing. Her
poetry simply is. It is an altar not to be gilded by extraneous matter."

One of the most fascinating problems that I encountered in gathering
oral history in Tonga was the mixture of pagan and Christian elements.
Many of my informants told stories of supernatural experiences apart from
what Mormonism would call a mystical or spiritual experience. For example,
Muli Kaini, my former missionary companion who is now nearly 80,
says that the certain natural phenomena unique to his home island of
Utaha in Haapai are directly connected to the fortunes or misfortunes of
the royal family—that at the death of any member of the royal household
a huge ball of flame called faanafi bursts skyward from the ancient royal
cemetery by the seashore, and that the water along the beach in front of his
village turns a deep red. He told me that he saw the faanafi as a young man.
He was fishing in the bay late at night. The village had received word a few
days earlier that the queen's son Tuku'aho had been ill. Muli paddled his
canoes to shore to find the entire village preparing for the voyage to the main
island for the funeral. They had received no other indication of the royal
death but from the faanafi. They set sail for Tonga Tapu the next morning
and met halfway with the government boat sailing north with the news that the
young prince had died.

There are countless stories like this that are prominent in the histories
of families and villages throughout the Tongan Islands. I have never been able
to entirely disregard these events as curious aberrations of the Tongan mind,
nor have I been able to believe them outright.

Two other problems that impact on the gathering of history and the use
of certain informants: The first is that many Tongans simply are not enchanted
by the labor of writing things of the past down. Since mo'oni (truth) so often
gives way to malle, or splendid rhetoric, anyway, the Tongan raconteur or
storyteller may say that he needs not write anything down, for when the
occasion requires he can compose spontaneously something just as good as he ever did in the past. Or he might deplore many of the legends and stories of the past which seem silly and childish to him. They contain no moral, no humor, and are of no real value except that they are very old.

The other problem is a definite and unfortunate social chasm between the generations. This is especially seen among families whose children have left Tonga, received their education elsewhere, and are now busily engaged in the game of material acquisition. That is, many children can no longer speak for their fathers and mothers. I shall never forget the home evening I attended in one of our Tongan families in Laie a few years ago. It provided a clear example of one kind of cultural defection and the generation gap. The lesson that evening was given by the 78 year old grandfather just up from Tonga. The children, who have been in America for four years and attend Laie Elementary and Kahuku High, were lined up on the couch. The subject of the lesson was "Avoiding Sin and Remembering Who You Are and Acting Accordingly." In their case, said the old man, they were Tongans. They came from Tonga, they are here to get an education, and they should prepare to return to help their people. The lesson was given in a typical, violent oratorical style. The old man flailed the air. In mighty sweeps and flourishes he denounced the life styles which were corrupting the Tongans in America, the concern for money, the wearing of immodest clothes, the lack of regard for their elders, the breaking of the Sabbath (as you know, the Sabbath in Tonga is kept by the people on pain of fines or imprisonment), the addiction to cosmetics, and horror of horrors, the inability to speak fluent Tongan. Despite the spectacular display of classic Tongan oratory my attention was drawn to the children on the couch. The very young ones stared at the old man in bewilderment. Those in elementary school were engrossed in a game of making faces at or tickling each other. One teenage girl would look up occasionally from the True Romance comic book she cradled between her feet. The older teenage daughter kept looking at the clock and trying, unsuccessfully, to suppress her yawns. The parents of the children repeatedly barked out helpless commands mingled with threats to listen.

In Tonga, too, there is a cultural chasm between the generations. It no longer a pleasure for the young people to sit in the kava circles and listen to the poems and tales of ancient Tongans, or to try to master the language of the chiefs, when they could be down to a rock concert on the beach, or at the latest Japanese movie, or when they could be working five hours overtime at their job for an extra 75c.

I hope that my discussion of the pitfalls facing the investigator of Tongan oral history does not appear that it is all a hopeless case, and that every Tongan is a liar, and that you can't trust any information that you get from a native informant. Surely not every investigator will meet all of these problems, but I do believe they are important to keep in mind. Actually I am quite optimistic about how Tongans themselves can be organized and trained in the principles of investigation and recording so that there will be an effective check against the over-exuberance or the reticence of an informant.

I also believe that there is generally a healthy objectivity among those who speak for Tonga's past. Some very important people are not particularly eager to press some of the current claims concerning the sophistication of Tongan crafts and ways of doing things. It seems that some writers, trying to establish the Polynesian identity with a proud heritage, may exaggerate the advanced nature of early civilizations. I remember in a conversation with King Taula'ahoe I mentioned something that I had read about the remarkable
navigational skill of the early Tongans. His good-natured reply was simply, "Bah, humbug! The ancient Tongans sailed by dead reckoning. If they could get as close as 150 miles to either side of an island they would simply follow the flocks of sea birds to the island. That is, they would set sail for a distant land, travel until they saw the birds, and then take the first flight home."

Finally, much more work needs to be done in gathering, organizing, and recording oral culture and histories. Many precious accounts of faith, perseverance, and pioneer-like courage, which reverberate over pulpits in Tonga but are not written down, may be lost after the departure of this generation. Many people who have rare cultural information and skills of communication are forgotten in the rush and bustle of more practical matters, such as economic survival, higher education, and technology. As I mentioned before, there are no longer young people in the kava circles of the elders. The majority of the current generation are not interested in family genealogies or in preserving and enriching the Tongan language.

In 1977 I had the privilege of organizing a Tongan Language and Culture Curriculum Committee at Liahona High School. The purpose of our organization was to gather as many materials in print as possible and to conduct extensive investigation for information not in print. The committee, to my knowledge, is still working to create Tongan language and culture manuals to be used in each of the various classes at Liahona from Class 7 to Form 6.

I hope through our enthusiasm for historical and other forms of research we will help stimulate needed investigation in Tonga and elsewhere. I predict that if there is not this kind of enthusiasm, and if the people themselves do not participate in this research, then the Tongan people, like the Hawaiians, will someday wake up to a desire to hearken back to their heritage and their identity, but find that the cultural heroes are long dead and their compositions and histories lost. I trust that this will not be so.