

Caroline Ralston and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Sanctity and Power: Gender in Polynesian History*. Special issue of the *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 22, nos. 3-4, 1987. Canberra: Australian National University. Pp. 113. Paper, A\$11.00, US\$13.00.

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The editorial board of the *Journal of Pacific History* is to be commended on its decision to allocate two numbers to a combined issue on aspects of the status and role of women in eastern and western Polynesia in pre-contact and early contact times. Given the paucity of published material on gender relations in Pacific history, this volume represents a valuable resource for tertiary teachers and students, and for those interested in the continuing work of recording and analyzing island history.

The five papers in this volume were originally presented in Suva at session of the 1985 Pacific History Conference. All are written clearly and well. The historical approach represented is that which focuses on the concrete, including the meticulous construction of genealogies. There is little discussion or reference to theory, although feminist approaches to reassessments of historical accounts clearly provided number of the writers with their themes. The writers have utilized archival resources in Europe, Australia, and the Pacific; accounts by explorers and missionaries; and oral histories and genealogies collected in the field.

The papers focus on high-born women and their access to and use of political power. As Ralston points out in her introduction, we have little information on "the lives and experiences of ordinary men and women or the transformation of gender relations in the post-contact era" (p. 115). Three authors deal with polities in western Polynesia (Penelope Schoeffel, Phyllis Herda, and Elizabeth Wood Ellem), one (Nicholas Thomas) discusses an eastern Polynesian society, that of the Marquesas, and the fifth (Niel Gunson) covers a number of eastern and western Polynesian societies, as well as nineteenth-century Madagascar, a non-Islamic Malay society.

Gunson's paper surveys the role and status of chiefly women. He dis-

tinguishes between the relatively small number of "sacred female chiefs . . . largely restricted to Samoa, Tonga and Hawaii" and those high-born women who were designated "female headmen." Gunson states this allocation to or assumption of a leadership role by women was a relatively common occurrence throughout Polynesia. He stresses that such women were seen as women who had taken on the role, behavior, and character of men. He also believes, as did Bott (1981:8), that some Polynesian societies at certain times offered opportunities for the acquisition of power and status to some nonchiefly men and occasionally to high-status women.

Gunson considers the possibility of such "reversed gender roles" as "not difficult to explain in Polynesia" (p. 144). In his view primary socialization in Polynesia was not concerned with assigning specific gender roles. In support of this assertion he cites the nongender-specific naming of individuals and nongender-specific task assignment to children in households (pp. 144-145). I would take issue with him on his speculations regarding the phenomenon of men whom he calls transsexual, and whom I would prefer to term not-masculine men, that is, males who are feminine in presentation. *Some* of this category of men cross-dress, and *some* are homosexual in behavior (see Cowling 1986). He speculates that numbers of not-masculine men "may well have been" matched by numbers of not-feminine women in societies such as Samoa and Tahiti.

Utilizing a term coined by Oscar Lewis ([1946] 1970), Gunson also suggests that the apparent sexual freedom of many Polynesian women is evidence of "manly-heartedness" (p. 144). In some societies, such as Tahiti and Tonga, high-born women were able to be selective about their sexual alliances and to abandon them if they wished (see Bott 1981:63). While taking a number of lovers may be regarded by some in Western society as aberrant or as "male" behavior, I do not believe it can be taken as evidence of "manly-heartedness" in Polynesia, but simply as evidence of a different set of sexual mores.

In his discussion of *tapu* and gender in the Marquesas, Thomas emphasizes the tendency of nineteenth-century recorders of Marquesan culture to link most *tapu* to femaleness, and particularly to a femaleness that was out of place. For example, *tapu* was said to be breached if women passed over male-associated artifacts or the persons of males (p. 125). Thomas criticizes earlier accounts of Marquesan *tapu* for being too simplistic in their focus on women and women's menstrual blood. He explains that many *tapu* were associated with femaleness because the vagina was seen as the channel through which human beings

entered the world of the living, the domain of light (*ao*), from the domain of darkness (*po*). It remained the powerful link between the supernatural world and the world of the living. Apparently *tapu* was assigned to all women, particularly sacred women who were vehicles of the gods in Marquesan religion, and other women could utilize the concept of *tapu* to gain social power (p. 132).

Schoeffel and Herda both examine the histories of chiefly women in societies prior to sustained European contact. Schoeffel discusses the genealogy of a seventeenth-century woman paramount chief, **Salamāsina** of western Samoa. Her paper offers some thoughtful insights into previous scholarly work, such as that of Ortner (1982) on gender relations in Polynesia, and into previous accounts of precontact Polynesian cosmology and theology. Schoeffel locates the rationale of the ranking systems of Polynesian societies such as Tonga and Samoa in their origin myths, but considers that there was less emphasis on the duality or contrast of maleness and femaleness. Like Gunson she believes these principles were not separated in the cosmologies of western Polynesia, and if they were separate, they were not seen as positive and negative opposites (p. 176). Women, however, could transmit *mana*, godly powers, by the bearing of children, and women could transmit rank to these children. If the womb was seen as such a powerful vehicle, it is not surprising that there might have been a strong emphasis on the preservation of the virginity of some high-born women in Samoa and Tonga.

Salamasina represented a combining of bloodlines of high-born Samoan families with that of the sacred chief of Tonga, the Tu'i Tonga, who was considered a descendant of the high god of the heavens, Tangaloa. Schoeffel depicts Salamasina's elevation to the highest chiefly ranks as not so much by her own choice but as part of a dynastic consolidation by her relatives in opposition to the domination of chiefly families in Manu'a in eastern Samoa (now American Samoa). Nevertheless, in Samoan genealogical lore Salamasina is the ancestress of several paramount chiefly lines, although her gender--and that of her daughter, who was the transmitter of the titles to **Salamāsina's** descendants--was not always acknowledged by male historians and others (p. 174). Matrilineal succession and descent from Salamasina were fundamental to the transmission of major chiefly titles across the whole Samoan polity during the following four centuries, while local titles tended to be controlled by "localized descent groups and orator groups" (p. 191).

Herda's paper discusses a somewhat maligned Tongan chiefly woman, Tupoumoheofo, who was a member of the lineage of the secular high chief, the Tu'i Kanokupolu, and the principal wife of Tu'i Tonga

Paulaho in the late eighteenth century (p. 199). It seems that she was ambitious for her *kainga*, cognate kin, and for her lineage. Drawing on accounts by Cook and information contained in later Tongan histories that had been compiled from oral accounts, Herda gives a detailed picture of Tupoumohefo's rise to power. She announced herself as the Tu'i Kanokupolu during a time of political disturbance, following a rapid turnover in the holders of the title, and following (possibly) the death of her husband. By claiming the title she placed herself in opposition to male cousin, Tuku'aho, a son of her father's younger half-brother. Technically she was Tuku'aho's sister and therefore outranked him. Tuku'aho was determined to ensure that his father, Mumui, would succeed to the Tu'i Kanokupolu title. Tupoumohefo's assumption of the title started civil war in which she and her faction were defeated. Gunson reports that following her exile to Fiji she married into an aristocratic Fijian family (p. 162).

Tupoumohefo was depicted by the early history reporters and recorders as being ambitious for herself as well as being concerned with ensuring the succession rights of her son, Fuanunuiava (surely a conventionally motherly action?). Her behavior was construed by the Wesleyan missionary and historian John Thomas as "unwomanly" and "odious in the extreme" (p. 207). Thomas had utilized written and oral information obtained from Tamaha Amelia, a high-born descendant of Mumui and therefore of the rival branch of the lineage. Thomas had misunderstood the later Tongan condemnation of Tupoumohefo's actions: It was not that she was a woman who wished to rule, but that she came from the rival faction. Herda blames the false perceptions of Tupoumohefo's assumption of the title on nineteenth-century shifts in the role of women in Tonga due to missionary influence, and also on the missionaries' insufficient understanding of Tongan views of the function of the *kainga*. The present-day ruling family of Tonga is descended from the junior branch of the lineage that Tupoumohefo had attempted to prevent from holding the title.

I have to confess to a partiality for one particular paper in this volume. This is a study of the late Queen Salote Tupou by Elizabeth Wood Ellem. Queen **Sālote** was a remarkable woman who made astute use of traditional Tongan concepts that attribute power and certain rights to the eldest sister, in addition to drawing on her own great abilities and political sense. This paper is part of a larger dissertation on the life and rule of the late Queen **Sālote** and her consort, Tungi (Wood Ellem 1981). Queen **Sālote** was able to fend off British colonizing interests as her father and grandfather had done. She did this by consolidating her royal powers and political control in Tonga during the first decade of

her reign, which began in 1917, and by her self-presentation as a woman in which, contemporary opinion averred, was combined the best of Tongan and European qualities. She was the descendant of one of the three primary lineages in precontact Tonga, that of the Tu'i Kanokupolu, and her marriage to Tungi Mailefihi allied her with another descendant of this line.

Wood Ellem outlines how Queen Salote consolidated her authority and the inheritance rights of her descendants. She endured overt and covert challenges to her power and authority during the first decade of her rule, again not so much because she was a woman, but because, in the view of some other chiefly titleholders, she represented the wrong lineage.

Queen **Salote** to this day is regarded as the foremost authority on Tongan traditional life and knowledge. She was able to fend off what she considered would be the ill-effects of modernization for the duration of her reign, and was responsible for the maintenance of a strong national identity in Tonga. Wood Ellem makes the point that Queen **Salote's** gender was of primary importance in ensuring her accession and the maintenance of her authority. Her alliance with Tungi Mailefihi was another vital factor in ensuring the success of her reign and the maintenance of an independent Tonga (p. 219).

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