

Edwin N. Ferdon, *Early Tonga As the Explorers Saw It, 1616-1810*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1987. Pp. 340, illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$29.95 cloth.

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In *Early Tonga As the Explorers Saw It, 1616-1810*, Ferdon has provided a useful compilation of European texts that were based on observations made during the period specified. Although one wishes that the author had occasionally strayed out of his temporal designation in order to enrich his data (especially to include the journals of European explorers Dumont d'Urville and William Waldegrave), the wisdom of his decision can be appreciated in the perspective gained from the observations recorded before the advent of sustained missionary contact and, perhaps more significantly, before the rise of the revolutionary **Tāufa'āhau** to political prominence. Other scholars would do well to remember the dynamic nature of all cultures and societies, whether before or after European contact, as well as the possibility of attributing greater historical depth to more recent events and customs.

Ferdon's depiction of life in pre-1810 Tonga would, however, have

been improved by a more detailed critique of his primary sources. While he is quick to point out the “vagaries of oral tradition” (pp. 182, 184), which in his opinion make it unreliable as a historical source, he is not so critical of the European texts that are, by and large, accepted unquestionably as truthful and accurate accounts. This is especially unfortunate when obvious errors are present in the texts. For example, Mariner’s assertion that an “oldest son” ranked higher than an “oldest daughter” (p. 39) is contrary to what is known about Tongan society (see, for example, Kaeppeler 1971, Rogers 1977, Bott 1981) and probably represents an error on Mariner’s or his editor’s part. However, if Ferdon is indirectly suggesting that the accepted notions of Tongan ranking are a post-eighteenth-century innovation, then more explication by him is warranted.

In addition, Ferdon often treats omissions from these early European records as absolute proof that a custom, myth, or institution was not present in Tonga at that time and that its subsequent appearance must represent transformation or a diffusionary influence (see, for example, pp. 29, 55, 194-196, 261). While an omission from a visitor’s description may, indeed, indicate such a phenomenon it is conceivable, and more probable, that it simply represents an omission by the particular author, many of whom spent a very limited period in the archipelago.

The volume is divided into ten chapters (plus an epilogue) and covers topics such as dwellings, social organization and government, *kava* ritual, religion, life cycle, recreation, food procurement and preparation, trade and transportation, and warfare. While certainly comprehensive, Ferdon’s categorization (as in his earlier work, *Tahiti As the Explorers Saw It, 1767-1797* [Tucson, 1981]) reflects a European construction of the universe that can often obstruct or distort the indigenous point of view. For example, the prominence of Tongan women in terms of kinship rank and public authority, while acknowledged in passing, is not given the attention it deserves. Such an arrangement does, by and large, accurately reproduce the early Europeans’ conception of Tongan society, but there seems little value in perpetuating such errors and biases. Informed comment by Ferdon on such discrepancies would have been welcome.

A case in point is Ferdon’s treatment of marriage and divorce. Although acknowledging that “all early descriptions of weddings are of those of the chiefly class” (p. 134), Ferdon ethnocentrically assumes that “the simple pattern revealed probably applied to marriages at all levels of Tongan society,” which is simply not the case. In traditional Tongan society only the chiefly class “married” in the sense of the union being

ritually marked and acknowledged by society at large. The *tu'a* (common people) were said to have just lived together with the implication that they were like animals rather than "chiefly" human beings. Similarly, "divorce" (pp. 136-137) is a culturally loaded term suggesting formal dissolution of a union. No such ritual marked the end of Tongan marriage as it was not conceived of as a monogamous or lifelong institution.

An unfortunate and unnecessary shortcoming of the work is the overall omission of macrons and occasional deletion of glottals from many of the Tongan words, as well as misspellings that more careful proofreading could have avoided.

Despite these reservations, *Early Tonga As the Explorers Saw It, 1616-1810* represents an informative summary of what Europeans encountered during their stays on Tonga. The volume will be especially welcomed by those who do not wish to wade through the voluminous publications on which it is based. The book is well written and contains fourteen reproductions of illustrations from the explorer publications. Ferdon's referencing is meticulous and provides the reader with enough information to allow easy data location in his sources. In addition, his identification and discussion of plants identified by the Europeans (pp. 205-207) is informed and instructive. So is his hypothesis on the timing of yam planting and the *'inasi* (first fruits) ceremony--a question that has stumped many a scholar.

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