Preface

In much of the postcolonial Global South, people's lives today are suffused with anxiety. Anxiety emerges in association with many different dynamics, the most obvious of which is economic uncertainty: In many societies, while a small minority of people appears to be getting richer, the bulk of the population increasingly sinks into poverty while having to listen to local elites and powerful outsiders urging them to be more frugal. The global economic collapse at the end of the new millennium's first decade has only aggravated these dynamics. Anxiety is what motivates people to seek greener pastures in wealthier countries, in the hope that geographical mobility will translate into economic mobility. At the destination, however, many find themselves as impoverished as where they started if not more so, with the added burden of living in fear of immigration checks and facing the prospect of a shameful empty-handed return home. Anxiety, however, is not a matter only of economics but is often cultural. It is, for example, a matter of who belongs where, as many societies are experiencing "the return of the local," a revalorization of notions of belonging, continuity, and tradition, cultural essentializations in the service of a politics of inclusion and exclusion (Geschiere 2009: 1). Citizens of Western nations are not the only ones to experience anxiety about the influx of immigrants. In the developing world as well, migrants from other places, the descendants of local people who migrated, and the images and practices that they bring are often deemed threatening to the economic, political, and social order. These tensions all contribute to an ongoing "malaise of modernity" (Jolly 2001: 198, echoing Taylor 1991) created by conflicts between groups, positions, symbols, and projects.

This book explores the workings of this malaise in one society on the edge of the global, the island kingdom of Tonga. It analyzes the way in which

segments of this small-scale society develop different understandings of what modernity is, how it should be made relevant locally, and how it should mesh with tradition. A pivotal feature of my argument is that the anxieties that Tongans experience in the twenty-first century are the product of both continuity and rupture with the past and that they are also generative of this continuity and rupture. In this respect, my analysis departs from analyses of comparable cases that associate change with anxiety and continuity with comfort. I am also suspicious of facile explanations associating reproduction with localness and change with outside "influences." Instead I demonstrate that, in a society that is deeply connected to the outside world through its diasporic migrants, change not only comes from elsewhere but is also generated locally. It is here that I am likely to part company with many Tongans, both intellectuals and ordinary citizens, who make sense of the world in which they live through a scenario that can be paraphrased as, "Everything was fine until new ideas were brought in from the outside." Similar arguments dominate naïve Western representations, such as those that inform coverage of Tonga in the international media, as Western journalists frequently arrive in Tonga convinced that they have stepped into a slightly ludicrous tropical time warp, with its seemingly feudal political system and its large-bodied people. I argue that, instead of pointing accusatory fingers at the allegedly disruptive intrusion of modernity in an otherwise tranquil tradition-steeped society, we should seek to understand Tongan anxiety as being the product of a convergence of the forces of history, tradition, and locality on the one hand and, on the other, the forces of the present, modernity, and the global. The relevance of this analysis reaches well beyond the shores of Tonga, to many other societies of the Pacific Islands and, further afield, the Global South.

Many ethnographies of global flows have focused on migrants and the strategies that they develop in coping with multiple allegiances and identities. Less commonly, anthropologists have followed the movements of commodities, ideas, and images across geographical locations, producing some of the more innovative works in contemporary anthropology (e.g., Foster 2008, Gewertz and Errington 2010, Hansen 2000, Lakoff 2006). This book takes a different approach, while maintaining at the same time a congruent focus with these other works: The frame of cultural reference is what moves and is located elsewhere, while the agents stay in place.

I first went to Tonga as a nineteen-year-old, fearless in my naïveté, having just obtained an undergraduate degree in mathematics after a rather odd upbringing in various countries. I was searching at the time for a variety of interrelated experiences: ethnographic fieldwork (although my idea of what that involved was more than a little vague); adding another language to my repertoire; and the romance of the exotic. I arrived in early 1978 in Vava'u, the larger northern island group of Tonga, with the little money I had earned doing construction work in San Francisco, and was almost immediately employed teaching English and mathematics in one of the secondary schools, run by the Wesleyan Church. I lived in a small village, which satisfied my quest for exoticism, in a Tongan style coconut-frond house (*fale Tonga*) that a kind family had built for me in hope that it would bring in a salaried household member but into which the villagers' roaming pigs would periodically conduct infuriating raids. I managed, perhaps, not to offend too many people. But I did acquire a reasonable competence in the language and got a glimpse of the fact that the exotic is not as simple as it appears at first glance, particularly when other people control it. I left Tonga again at the end of that year to pursue graduate work in linguistics at Stanford, but in less than a year I found myself drawn back to the Pacific Islands. A variety of improbable circumstances soon took me to other locations in the region, particularly Tuvalu. I returned to rural Tonga for several extended visits through 1982, for a total stay of about half a year—then did not visit again for a dozen years, being fully involved with fieldwork in Tuvalu and starting a career in anthropology.

In 1994, 1995, 1997, and 1999–2001, I again conducted fieldwork in Tonga, this time in Nuku'alofa, the country's capital. By then my Tongan had become a little rusty and was competing with my knowledge of Tuvaluan, but I did manage to reacclimatize, this time, to the capital city's distinctively Tongan urbanity. I focused on constructions of gender, in particular on *fakaleitī* or *leitī*, transgender (or "effeminate") men whose lives and experience were more often the subject of romanticized constructions than serious analysis in anthropology and in the popular imagination in New Zealand, where I was living and teaching anthropology during that period. It is through *leitī*'s eyes that I began to appreciate how Tonga at the end of the millennium both differed from and was fundamentally continuous with Tonga in the 1970s, how urban Tonga both disengaged from and was deeply connected to rural Tonga,

and how Tongans' lives are deeply enmeshed with a world well beyond the shores of their island nation. I began to understand how capitalism, consumption, and development in contemporary Tonga articulate with traditionalism, exchange, and a resilient sense of humor. It is this paradoxical co-existence of different modes of experience that formed the focus of the fieldwork I conducted for half a year in 2008, shortly after the country experienced some of the most significant changes in its modern history.

This book focuses on seven different sites of social life, the choice of which does not result from a theoretically articulated agenda. I became intrigued with them because they seemed to encapsulate, to me as an analyst and for the agents who frequent them, particularly evocative aspects of modernity in Tonga. Agents' negotiations over the meaning of modernity in these sites spotlight objects and bodies, whose materiality constitutes a point of convergence of ideologies, emotions, political positions, personal projects, state policies, and global discourses. Agents' focus on objects and bodies can be understood both particularistically and comparatively. For Tongans, objects represent a pivot for the articulation of what they see as the traditional order and the modern condition, as is illustrated most vividly by the dramatic increase in the importance of the prestation of traditional textile valuables, alongside rampant capitalism. Similarly, bodies are at the foreground of modernity-conscious Tongans' preoccupations and outsiders' commentaries about their society.

The particular role that objects and bodies play in the articulation of past, present, and future is not confined to the specifics of the Tongan context. Bodies and objects are intensely cultural at the same time as agents strive to naturalize them, as many anthropologists of modernity have highlighted. Perhaps not surprisingly, the sites on which my fieldwork focused all occupy public spaces where Tongans come together and negotiate what it means to be modern. Another anthropologist may well not have paid much attention to them, as they are all quite banal and resemble, on the surface at least, cognate contexts of social life in industrial countries. My attention was drawn to these sites in large part because of my prior lengthy experience conducting fieldwork on remote or at least rural regions of the Pacific. It is because they contrast with village life in Tuvalu and Tonga, and yet articulate social dynamics recognizable from this other life, that I found them particularly fascinating.

My methodology has varied considerably in the various stages of fieldwork and in different sites. In the 1990s and 2000s, I spent time doing "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998), particularly in the sewing shop of the person who had become a close friend, Malakai Fonua (a.k.a. Lady Mara). I saw the shop move twice, to finally operate from one of Tonga's first shopping centers, a row of now rather dilapidated shops and offices surrounding a parking lot. I interviewed people in different locations, sometimes in depth, other times superficially, and conducted a few surveys. Whenever possible, I recorded people interacting with one another in naturalistic settings, using the techniques and analytic methods with which I am familiar from linguistic anthropology and utilizing successive generations of technologies (from old-style cassette recorders to digital ones, minidisk recorders, and digital recorders, from Hi-8 video to mini-DV, from PAL to NTSC), dishearteningly complicated to convert, harmonize, and preserve.

By 2008, Malakai had taken over the management of the hair salon next to his sewing shop, and when I returned he set me up along with my research assistant in the largely unused "reception area" of the salon. From there my research assistant, a gifted young woman who juggled five or six jobs at any given time, conducted interviews with patrons. I could also take part in or eavesdrop on conversations between patrons of the various businesses in the shopping center. Elsewhere, I talked, casually or formally, to a wide array of people, including government officials, intellectuals, business people, and ordinary folk, young and old, women, men, and everyone else. These conversations took place in restaurants, offices, shops, marketplaces, church premises, street corners, the gym, private homes, inside taxis, and occasionally around urban kava circles (informal gatherings around a bowl of the national drink, a mild narcotic)—although the kava I had already imbibed in villages in the late 1970s and early 1980s was enough for a lifetime. I spoke Tongan whenever possible, true to many Tongans' and my own conviction of the importance of language maintenance, or English when it clearly was my interlocutor's preferred language for conversation with me. Later, in 2009, when I was conducting fieldwork among rugby players and other Tongan immigrants based in Japan (which informs this book, although the ethnography is being written up elsewhere), some of my interviews were in Japanese.

While this ethnography makes frequent reference to the contrast between urban and village life and focuses primarily on the former, I shy away

from defining this work as an instance of "urban anthropology," that is, an anthropology that focuses on the issues (frequently "problems") commonly associated with urban living: anonymity, conflict, crowding, and so on. The first caveat is that, frankly, Nuku'alofa's urban patina remains rather unconvincing from a comparative perspective. The town is small and its hustle and bustle confined to a small area surrounding the produce market, the police station, the prime minister's office, and the main street, Tāufa'āhau Road. On Saturday afternoons, it empties out. The poorly maintained roadways, the vacant lots (which have multiplied in the aftermaths of arson fires and rioting in November 2006, which I will describe shortly), and the freely roaming pigs, fowls, and packs of dogs do little to foster an atmosphere of cosmopolitan urbanity. Villagers from around the island of Tongatapu come to town with ease, formerly by truck, now by bus and private car. Some commute on a daily basis, others make the trip on Saturday mornings to buy vegetables at the produce market or sell used clothing at the secondhand marketplace. While the quality of life in Nuku'alofa (or lack thereof) sets it apart from life in villages and outer islands, the two are at the same time so deeply interconnected that any attempt to keep them segregated would miss out on important aspects of life in urban Tonga.

Since the turn of the millennium, Tongans have become intimately familiar with social research, as squadrons of experts of all stripes have been descending on the country in increasing numbers to conduct surveys on every imaginable social and other "problem" (such as teenage pregnancy, obesity, youth "disaffection"). Most of these (generally) well-meaning but overpaid, fly-in-fly-out experts in the employ of New Zealand or Australian development agencies, or associated with the United Nations or other international bodies, work under time pressure. While they index Tonga's global ties and regional modernity, their understanding of the local context is often minimal. In their reports, they often invoke a highly reified notion of "culture," portraying it as a hurdle to be surmounted before development can take place, as is typical of the "modernization" discourse operative around the world. In other reports, "culture" is something to be "respected" but ultimately ignored, echoing the well-rehearsed way in which Māori and Pākehā (white) biculturalism is implemented in New Zealand (Goldsmith 2005). The choice of overseas contractors to conduct this work is frequently a condition for donor funding, a fact

that does not fail to irritate Tongan intellectuals, who justifiably feel that they are much better qualified to do the work. The avalanche of social research has introduced into the Tongan vocabulary a neologism borrowed from English, *sāvea*, "survey." In 2008, the easiest way to explain what I was up to was to use this term, for better or for worse, although it was not always a complete misrepresentation. Occasionally, confusion arose in the minds of government officials: Because all experts on flying visits need to be chaperoned by a particular ministry, which ministry was in charge of me?

For many Tongans, the fieldwork I conducted made little sense. I was not addressing "social problems" in any straightforward way. I was investigating "culture," but Tongans have very clear ideas of what culture is, and what I was researching was not it. For them, an anthropologist worth his or her salt should concentrate on aspects of Tongan culture that matter: rituals of rank, land tenure, brother–sister relations, *koloa faka-Tonga* "Tongan valuables," poetic genres, and the intricacies of traditional dancing. And, indeed, most anthropologists who have written about Tonga have focused on these topics, often grounding them in a distant Tongan past and underexamined assumptions of historical continuity. To quote George Marcus's apt words, "Even the very best contemporary ethnographic work in Tonga has constantly been contextualized and measured in terms of Tongan society at the time of Captain Cook [that is, the late eighteenth century] or Tongan society in the time of Tupou I [that is, the nineteenth century]" (2000: 526). (In the foregoing discussion, I will refer occasionally to information about early Tonga, but with a full awareness of their diachronic locus.) Anthropologists' compression of history reflects Tongans' own erasure of history. The nation-making mythology, for example, portrays the trajectory from the mid-nineteenth century to contemporary times as a period of unbroken stability, despite ample evidence of serious conflicts in the formation of the country's modernity.

Because they "skip" a century or more, few anthropologists working in Tonga have paid much attention to such modern-day agents as small-scale entrepreneurs eking out a living selling secondhand goods, needy people pawning their valuables, and young men lifting weights at the gym. For Tongans themselves, an analytic interest in these topics amounts to a slightly ridiculous celebration of the trivial and the contemporary. For example, when I presented an early version of the chapter on the secondhand marketplace at an educational institution in Nukuʻalofa, one prominent Tongan intellectual

politely voiced the opinion that I was creating "a tempest in a teacup." "You must be joking!" was the reaction of a close friend, a member of Nuku'alofa's business elite, when I told him that I had analyzed the secondhand marketplace as a site of modernity. "Maybe you would have been better off doing fieldwork in a village," he added tactfully some time later, as this book was nearing completion. More often than not, Tongans naturalize their and each other's everyday actions, explaining them by appealing to universal principles, such as the need to feed one's children and make improvements to the house where one's parents live. For mainstream Tongans, the dynamics of modernity that I analyze in this book are just sensible strategies for living, pragmatic action that need no explanation and are grounded in anything but culture. It is this naturalization, in fact, that makes them such good capitalist subjects.

Of course, the reactions that my research triggered reveals more about Tonga's traditional and transforming senses of rank and emerging class system than about the irrelevance of an anthropologist's research. Rank and class are deeply implicated in an ethnography that focuses on people in precarious social positions seeking to forge ahead with their lives, making ends meet as well as they can, and searching for self-respect in a competitive society where people are so quick to dismiss each other. Ironically, the denial of coevalness that Johannes Fabian (1983) attributes to anthropology also characterizes elite Tongans' position vis-à-vis their own less fortunate compatriots. It is significant that this ethnography focuses on sites that are often frequented by people who are themselves a bit of an embarrassment: the low-ranking, the poor, the young, the unemployed, the transgender, the charismatic Christians, and the criminals deported from countries of the diaspora. And here I am faced with a dilemma. Because our task as anthropologists is not to prove that our informants are wrong, I do not seek to demonstrate that the impatience with which elite and middle-class Tongans have greeted my research is ill founded. Backgrounding this work is the view that what one finds important or trivial, as anthropologists or subjects, is deeply embedded in a politics of positionality deserving of analytic attention. In the conclusion, I will return to the idea that the impatient and dismissive local reactions to my fieldwork are in fact constitutive of modernity, in Tonga and elsewhere.

This book seeks to demonstrate that what appears trivial or undignified at first glance may not necessarily be so under further scrutiny, this strategy being, after all, one of the best tricks of anthropology. Consequential insights can

be gained about Tonga, and about the modern condition in locations comparable to Tonga, by searching for meaning in the day-to-day practices of ordinary or marginal people, their struggles to find material comfort and to define what this comfort is, and their search for a modicum of dignity, perched as they are on the edge of the global, deeply enmeshed in capitalism and yet not quite of it. We cannot simply seek an understanding of this society's problems in purely economic terms, or by invoking a "breakdown of society" thesis, as many attempt to do in Tonga and elsewhere. Rather, this understanding is to be found in the space where the material intersects with the imagination.

Nor can we invoke "the outside world" or "the spoilt generation" to explain the sociopolitical changes that are rocking contemporary Tonga, as well as many other similar corners of the world. These invocations nevertheless constitute a hegemonic discourse of blame in Tonga, where many people feel that the problems that the country is experiencing are caused by "influence" from elsewhere. This discourse overlooks a number of important issues. One is that depicting the relationship between Tonga and the rest of the world as one of "influence" seriously oversimplifies the issues. Others are the facts that Tonga is deeply connected to the rest of the world and that Tongans are not simply the passive recipients of images from elsewhere. Tongans have always been their own interpreters of what has percolated from elsewhere, and the current generations are no exception.

This book is based on my engagement with Tonga and its people that is now entering its fourth decade. This length of time has provided plenty of opportunity to accumulate indebtedness, and I will necessarily overlook many people in these acknowledgments. From their extraordinary support of the odd twenty-year-old that I was in my early years in Tonga, I must belatedly thank Patricia Ledyard Matheson and Father Georges Callet. Since those days, I have cherished my ongoing friendship with Tupou Tonutonu and with Mary and Pesi Fonua, who stalwartly continue to run the Matangi Tonga news website and allowed me to reproduce several photos.

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