

The Kingdom of Tonga, Polynesia.

The Kingdom of Tonga (Tonga) lies in a south-west to north-east line in the South Pacific ocean. Most of the islands are raised coral islands, some are volcanic, and a few are atolls. Coral beaches lined with palm trees and emerald lagoons with luxuriant tropical vegetation are characteristic features. The Kingdom consists of approximately one hundred fifty islands, thirty-six of which are inhabited and divided into three groups: Vava'u in the north (also the name of the major island in this group), Ha'apai in the center, and Tongatapu in the south (also the name of the major island in this group). The capital town Nuku'alofa is on Tongatapu island. The total population reached 103,036 according to the latest census (2011), and more than a third (35,778) lives in the capital.

Tonga is a constitutional monarchy headed by King Tupou VI. He is the direct descendant of King George Tupou I who introduced the Tongan Constitution in 1875. Traditional Tongan society had at its top the *ha'a tu'i* 'royal line,' followed by the *hou'eiki* 'chiefs,' *ha'a matāpule* 'talking chiefs,' *kau mu'a* 'virtual or would-be talking chiefs,' and *kau tu'a* 'commoners.' All the titles were inheritable. The 1875 Constitution introduced the figure of the *nōpele* 'noble' in an attempt to substitute that of the chief in some of its traditional prerogative (such as owning land), but this latter figure still exist. Moreover, an increasing market oriented economy and an expanding bureaucracy have lately added a middle class that spans some of the traditional strata from commoners to chiefs.

Kinship ties are of paramount importance in Tongan society. The two major kin groups are *fāmili* and *kāinga*. A *fāmili* 'family' is made up of a married couple and their children living together in the same house and it usually includes some male and/or female collaterals and affinals (usually, son-in-law or daughter-in-law). The *'ulumotu'a* 'head' presides over this group. The *kāinga* 'extended family' is a group of people living in different households, mostly in the same village, but often including residences in other villages. They are related to one another by a bilateral relationship of consanguinity (cognatic system or kindred). A specific *'ulumotu'a* 'head' presides over this group besides his own family. In a changing contemporary Tongan society, membership to this kin group is not strictly following traditional guidelines and inclusion is more and more restricted to closer relatives than in the past. The basic parameters that are applied in establishing hierarchy at any level are gender and age, with the former preceding the latter. A female is always considered higher in rank than a male.

Nobody visiting Tonga will fail to notice the overwhelming presence of Christianity throughout the Kingdom. From the first failed attempt in 1797 to Christianize the islands by Wesleyan missionaries, the middle of last century saw an increasing presence of Christian religions. The contemporary religious landscape of Tonga is characterized by many Churches, The major one is the Free Wesleyan Church (37.3 %) that is also the 'official' religion of the Monarchy.

Tongan is an Austronesian language of the Oceanic subgroup. It belongs to the Western Polynesian languages, specifically the Tongic group. Seventy years as a British protectorate (until 1970) has resulted in the introduction of English. Much of the village population still knows little of this language, however, in Nuku'alofa and other major towns, most business transactions are conducted in it. While English is taught in elementary schools and is the language of most high school instruction, Tongan is the language commonly spoken in the streets, shops, markets, schools, offices, and churches.

The first European visitors in the late 1700s spoke of a population scattered throughout a densely cultivated land. Contemporary Tongans are now concentrated in villages and

small towns. Most villages lie around an empty area, called *mala'e*, used for social gatherings and games. Contemporary houses are usually rectangular and made of timber with corrugated iron roofs. The toilet and the kitchen are traditionally in separate huts, but modern houses have them indoor. Little furniture is used.

The village where I conducted the data collection is located on the island of Vava'u, in the northern archipelago by the same name. It is a small village of approximately one hundred and seventy inhabitants living in thirty-six houses. In the village, there is one main church (Free Wesleyan Church) with an adjacent hall for communal activities and another smaller church (Latter Day Saints). The elementary school is placed outside the village perimeter. Junior high and older students go to school in the main town of Neiafu, site of the local government and Governor.

The village lacks a noble, but has a residing chief. A *mataāpule* 'talking chief,' is also in residence. The local Wesleyan minister is an important member of the community. Ministers, however, are rotated every four years, and only their office and not them as individuals is part of the long lasting social fabric of the village. Another prominent figure is the elected '*ofisa kolo* 'town officer.' Thus, the village social structure suggests three formal positions: a chief, a ceremonial officer, and an elected town officer. One needs also to add the '*ulumotu'a* of the nine *kāinga* in which the population is divided. The main income of the villagers comes from subsistence. Farming, shell gathering and fishing are the most common activities. However, there are also a number of wage laborers earning cash and the cash economy has become more significant in the last couple of decades. Cash and goods from relative abroad—New Zealand, Australia, and the US, mainly—has also recently become a relevant source of income for the villagers.

The effects of climate changes have not left this small Polynesian kingdom untouched. The level of the ocean water has increased and tides are finding their way inland causing damage to cultivated plots. Typhoons have become more frequent with occasional loss of lives in addition to the destruction of houses and vegetation, including numerous trees (almost all fruit-bearing, e.g., coconut tree, mango, papaya, and banana). A well-established weather pattern—alternating between rainy and dry seasons—has also been affected with longer drought spells and with rain that has become unpredictable in its quantity and distribution over the yearly cycle. The availability, quantity and size of fish has also been affected in such a way that villagers rely less on their own fishing activities and more on the fish market in the main town and port of the island.