

THE POLITICAL WISDOM OF OUR FOREFATHERS

SIOTAME HAVEA

*Si'i pe kae hā
(We are a small island; we are still great.)¹*

Editor's Note:

Myths are collectively owned in Tonga by many individuals, and, as such, there could be many individual tellings despite the general meaning remaining the same. Thus, the myths re-told here are those told and known to the author, based on the author's position, relationships, and life experiences. These represent one of many ways to tell these stories.

This essay retells two selected Tongan origin myths along with some exegetical commentary. The myths are known as “Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo” and “‘Aho‘eitu.” These two myths are among the oldest of the Tongan myths that have been transmitted to us from our forefathers and thus hold significant wisdom for understanding Tongan worldviews. Myths are not simply mere fictional stories; rather, they carry within them socio-political principles relevant to bringing about socio-political unity in Tonga. They are also vital in investigating the political structure in ancient Tonga. Doing exegetical commentary on these myths is crucial so that we are able to see what lies behind them. While other myths, such as “Kava‘onau” (the kava myth) or the myth of “Maui Teke Langi,” talk about other aspects of the structuring and restructuring of Tongan political life, the first two above-mentioned myths reveal the initial blueprint for organizing the ethical and political worldview in Tonga.

1. This proverb basically says it all: You don't have to be large in numbers or have lots of resources or money to be great.

Myths are stories created not by the gods of ancient Tongans, but by our ancient forefathers as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge and wisdom learned over generations of close existence on the lands and seas. Tongans revered those myths in a way that eventually shaped their way of belief and thinking. This is not only applicable to the Tongan people but is a worldwide occurrence that appears in all communities, both big and small. We often wonder how it is that these man-made stories hold such a powerful force in creating the belief system of all societies, especially the ancient ones. This work does not aim to prove the authenticity of myths, but rather is an attempt to see the wise teachings behind the myths selected above. Myths were sacred to the ancient Tongans, and to break their teachings was seen not only as a sin but as a crime. To our ancient forefathers, myths were like the word of the Bible, taken as words of truth. The following myths are quite well known among Tongans as they are taught to young children, and they are presented here to further elaborate how myths transmit our forefathers' wisdom.

THE MYTH OF “KO HAI, KO AU, KO MOMO”

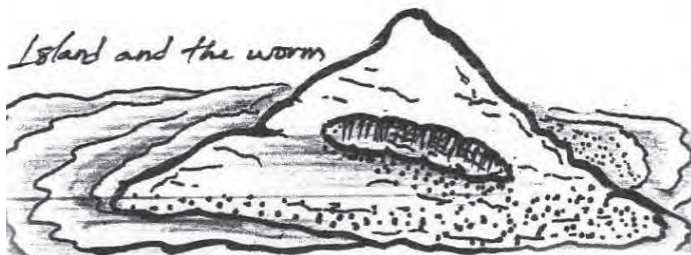
In the beginning there was no land, in spite of the fact there was sky. The gods were believed to live in the sky. Then one of the gods, Tangaloa Tufunga (Tangaloa the Carpenter), threw sawdust in the water, and it formed an island. Later, a bird flew down and bit a worm on the land into three pieces. Those three pieces eventually turned into the first people of Tonga.

Meaning of the Names

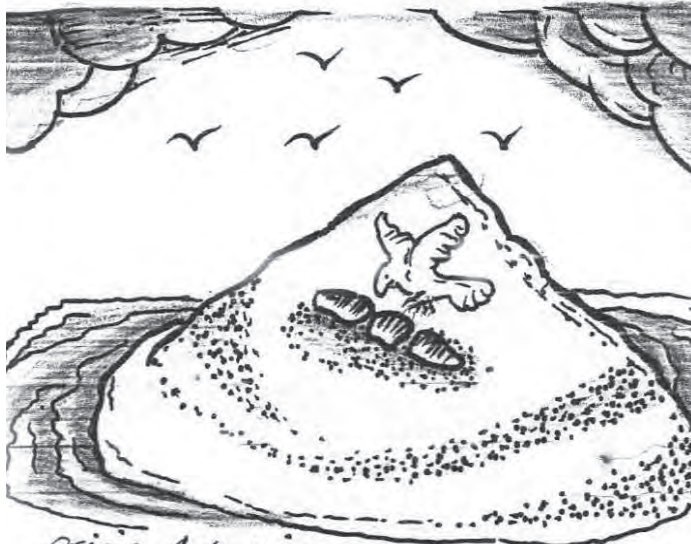
Taking the time to elaborate on the meanings behind the names is highly relevant to fully understand the political wisdom of our forefathers. Upon grasping the meanings of the names, we will be able to see why this myth failed to become the ontological root for the formation of Tongan politics. Politics is about the organization of various powers in the society so that it can function in a way that the people of that particular group believe to be the right mechanism for power structure.



Tangaloa Tufuaga (Tangaloa the carpenter)
Throwing Sawdust.



Island and the worm



Origin of Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo.

1

1 Drawing of the "Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo" myth. © Paula Mahe

The meaning of the name Ko Hai is “Who is it?” This was said to be the name of the first Tu’i Tonga (king of Tonga). The name expresses a state of confusion and uncertainty, depicting the image of a person groping in the dark. The name of the second person was Ko Au (I Am) . He was taken to be the second Tu’i Tonga, and his name echoes out the sound of confidence. The second king must have learned a great deal from the first, thus finding some kind of strong foundation to be confident in his ruling. However, the name of the third brother was Ko Momo (fragmented but plenty). This brother was the origin of the commoners. They may be small but are plentiful in numbers.

This myth was bound to fail. It did not have in itself the political ingredients for the organization of a formidable political system. Our Tongan forefathers realized that this myth was based on a classless socio-political formation and that the psychological perspectives of this myth could not create a belief in the system itself. Conclusively, the formation of this myth was not built on a vertical structure of politics but rather on a horizontal basis, in which the psychology of respect (based on belief) had no place to become strong. Our forefathers knew that this horizontal basis for political formation was as weak as the classless society itself. In such a formation, no one is greater than the other—that is the psychology of a horizontal political formation. However, this paved the path for our forefathers to seek a vertical formation.

Critical Interpretation

There are two interpretations of the myth of “Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo.” The first interpretation sees the myth as representing the origin of the Tongan people, with all three men as the origin of the commoners. The second interpretation sees the first two men as the emergence of the first Tongan kings, with the third man taken as the origin of the commoners. Either interpretation we are willing to take on will lead us to conclude that the myth points toward a worldview acknowledging that such a society would always be in socio-political chaos. That Tongans emerged out of such an origin can be taken as a commentary on the origin of a classless society—a society in which all were equal in social, political, and economic rights. The myth

contends that, in such a societal state, the continuing struggle against others for survival would always be a way of life.

When we look at the second interpretation, we cannot escape the fact that such a state of existence would always make it difficult for kings to rule. In the Tongan worldview, rulers had to be inaugurated by a recognized authority, so to initiate rulers from a group of equal status would be impossible. In the myth of “Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo,” no one person could be taken to be of a higher status than the other. In such a situation, effective ruling would always be extremely difficult to attain, for two reasons. The first is that none of them could be seen as having higher socio-political status than the others. The second reason is based on the fact that there was no authoritative power to inaugurate any of the three men in this myth as a recognized ruler. Who has the right to authorize a ruler in such a situation? The right to rule and the right to be ruled must both be accepted and revered by both ends of the socio-political spectrum.

The political wisdom of our Tongan forefathers can easily be seen as we continue to unravel the truth behind these two ancient myths. However, some of the modern scholars contemptuously refer to ancient myths as *fakamolitonga* (old and useless). By looking at the myth of “Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo,” we cannot deny the literal story is impossible. How can it be that a human being can grow out of a part of a worm? Thus, one can easily be tempted to discard such a story as having nothing to do with reality. Though myths are not factually true, they carry within them principles that are indispensable to structuring the socio-political formation of society. Myth does establish the historical formation of the society, but in this case, the myth of “Aho‘eitu” established the historical description of early feudalism in Tonga, as discussed below. As the origination of history, it is an irreplaceable and dynamic principle in the formulation of political identity within the kingdom of Tonga.

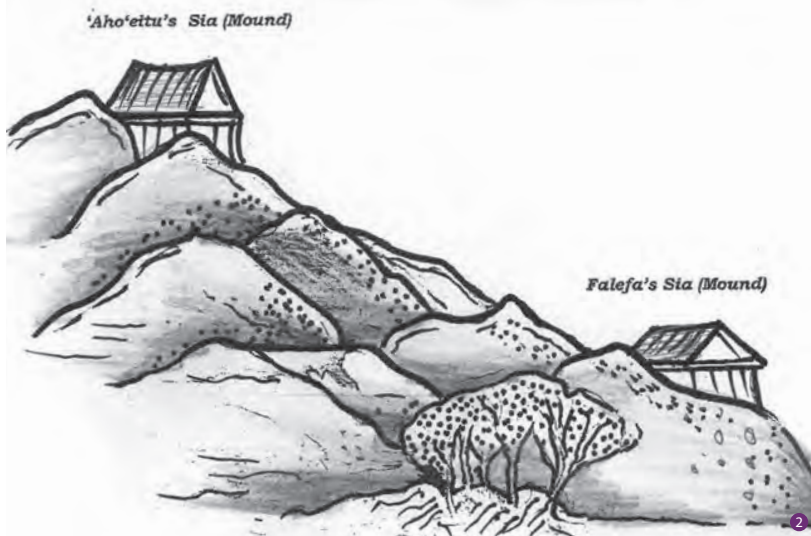
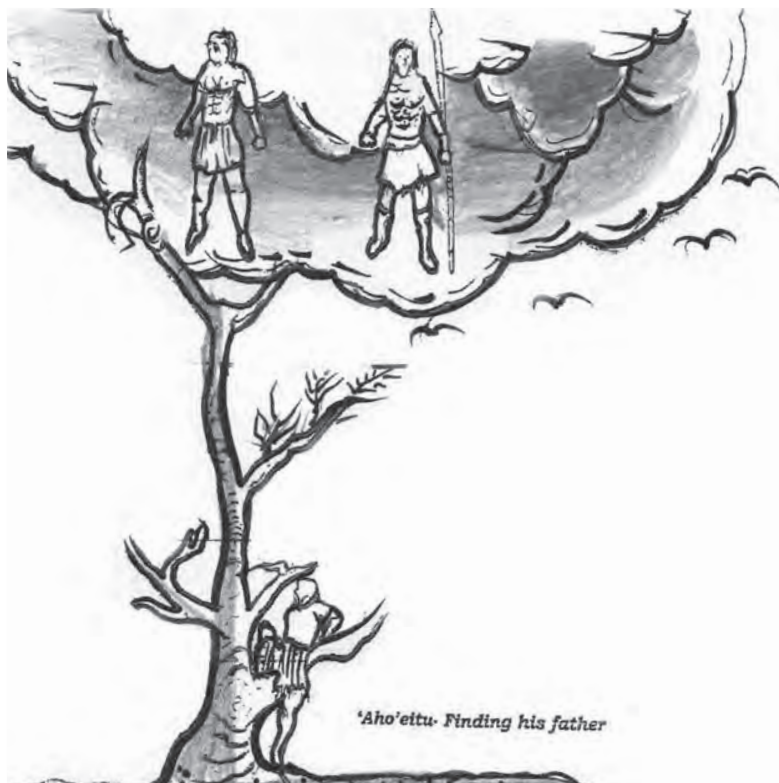
In ancient society, myth created culture, which in turn determined the nature of communal living. In the methodology of Tonga, the people came to know the social, political, economic, and psychological means for self-expression. They had to express themselves through the principles of their myths because myths

had been to them the reality of their history. In this situation, three important factors must exist in a myth so that it can be nationally accepted: it must be religiously based; the structure of the economic system must find its root in that myth; and the political structure must, through the religious factor of that myth, have the power to rule the core of the economic system. In other words, the second and third modes must find their strongholds only in the religious perspective of the myth. Without the involvement of a religious factor in a myth's formation, it cannot be communally accepted. Thus, ancient religion could not be done away with in the structuring of ancient Tonga.

THE MYTH OF “‘AHO‘EITU”

According to legend, one of the gods, Tangaloa 'Etumatupu'a, came to earth and became the father of a boy, 'Aho'eitu. Before the boy was born, Tangaloa returned to his home in the sky, and the boy was brought up singlehandedly by his mother, Va'epopua. 'Aho'eitu wanted so dearly to know the whereabouts of his father, so his mother told 'Aho'eitu how to find him. He climbed up an iron tree to where the gods lived and was welcomed by Tangaloa himself. 'Aho'eitu found out that he had four older brothers. They became jealous of him. Resolving to do away with him, the brothers killed and ate him. Tangaloa was very angry when he discovered the crime and made the cannibal brothers vomit out what they had eaten into a bowl (kumete). 'Aho'eitu was reconstituted and restored back to life. The brothers were compelled to pay respect to 'Aho'eitu as their superior, although he was younger and half-god/half-man. They were then ordered to serve 'Aho'eitu as he was sent back to earth to rule in Tonga as the Tu'i Tonga (king of Tonga), representing his father.

It is now more interesting to closely investigate the myth of “‘Aho'eitu,” for it will continue to unravel further development of interplay of various important factors in the formation of the Tongan political system. After the classless myth of “Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo” and its failure to organize any political scheme that could uphold society, the myth of “‘Aho'eitu” was formulated to bring a stable and formidable structure to



2 Drawing of the "Aho'eitu" myth. © Paula Mahe

Tongan politics. It is vital for us to see the interplay of the various factors of religion, economics, and politics in shaping the type of political unity in Tonga that still exists today.

It is also fundamental to see the involvement of ethics in the initiation of political unity in ancient Tonga. Ethics was not an alien principle then; it was the nature of the gods of the sky, especially Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a, the father of 'Aho'eitu. He was the godly figure who originally organized the Tongan political formation. However, let us focus on the interplay of the above-mentioned factors in bringing about the existence of the Kingdom of Tonga.

The difference between the myth of "Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo" and that of "'Aho'eitu" is basically the direct involvement of the god Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a in organizing the structure of various political classes in the society. The only involvement of Tangaloa Tufunga in the myth of "Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo" was when he threw down the sawdust. The sawdust finally turned into an island and produced a worm that eventually turned into the first human beings in Tonga. The organization of the society after these brothers came into being, though, was wholly dependent on their whims. There was no recognized authority that was above these three beings to inaugurate the socio-political system of the time. In contrast, in the myth of "'Aho'eitu," the involvement of 'Aho'eitu's father in organizing the formation of the socio-political structure of the time can be vividly seen.

The important element to refer to in this part is the power of religion in laying the foundation of politics in Tonga. It has been mentioned above that the inauguration of new political power has to be initiated by a recognized authority, and the only recognized authority at that time was the god of the sky, Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a. The Tongan term for god is *'otua* ("being of beyond" or "of beyond": *'o-tu 'a*). The Tongans unquestionably accepted the existence of the gods. It is the existence of beings beyond what human beings are capable to understand. They are ineffable and beyond the power of the human mind to explain, yet the people accepted their existence with a sense of reverence and the belief that they could never be questioned. Anything to do with gods was seen as sacred and *tapu*

(taboo). Sacredness strengthens the belief system. When sacredness of the gods is taken away or the people fail to respect it, it dismantles the vitality of such religious belief.

This is why the involvement of Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a in the myth of "Aho'eitu" is so fundamental to the structuring of Tongan politics. Tangaloa 'Eitumatupu'a was the basis of religious belief at that time. Instead of allowing the myth of "Ko Hai, Ko Au, Ko Momo" to dominate the formation of the political mindset in Tonga, the myth of "Aho'eitu" thus shifted the political belief to the involvement of the gods in such organization.

The coming of Tangaloa to earth was a way of saying that the gods were bringing the core of religion to earth. Thus, the identity of 'Aho'eitu was religiously formulated: half-god and half-man (god-man/ *'otua mo tangata*). By stating the identity of 'Aho'eitu this way, his socio-political status rose above anybody else in Tonga. He was religiously formed at a higher rank in every aspect of the society, and as his socio-political status was brought from the sky (*langi*), nobody could question it. Thus, to have Tangaloa as the father was a rock-solid foundation upon which to build politics.

The other interesting part of the myth is based on how 'Aho'eitu came to know his father in the sky. He climbed up an iron tree and came to find his father there along with four of his godly half-brothers. After the killing of 'Aho'eitu and his reconstitution, Tangaloa laid the socio-political foundation of Tonga. Thus, the original structure of Tongan politics was not done on earth, but was carried out in the sky by Tangaloa himself. It is hard, then, to deny that formulation of the "Aho'eitu" myth was religiously based. It was done in such a way in order to eliminate any opportunity to question the authenticity of the identity of 'Aho'eitu.

When Tangaloa found out that 'Aho'eitu's four half-brothers had murdered and eaten his son's body, he ordered them to vomit it into a bowl and brought 'Aho'eitu' back to life. He then sent them to earth and made 'Aho'eitu the first king of Tonga, with his four godly half-brothers relegated to being the first *falefa* (four houses) to serve 'Aho'eitu. They were relegated to this socio-political status because

of the unethical deed they had done to their half-god/half-man younger brother. Here, Tangaloa set the tone of ethics in the socio-political formation of the kingdom so that crime was unfit to remain in the sky: the perpetrators had to come down to earth to serve their younger brother. Such an ethical move set an example to the people of Tonga that if such relegation could be done to Tangaloa's sons, it could also be done to anybody on earth. The ethical principle of respecting life had to be observed at all times. On the other hand, the stronger person could not do as he liked with the life of the weaker person. Ultimately, the unethical principle of "might is right" was viewed from the domain of religion as a principle that should not be applied in the running of the kingdom. Ethics was the foundation of the formation of the kingdom's socio-political structure.

According to the above discussion, politics was deeply rooted in the realms of religion and ethics. Ethics and politics were both set in the sky by the god himself. As the people of Tonga respected religion with ultimate awe and reverence, politics was in a safe domain as their belief protected them from going against the political formation. In other words, they could not deny the validity of their own belief. Therefore, the origination of the kingdom was bound to last because it did not go against the belief of the people but was built on the basis of the belief system of the people at large.

The last important factor to bring to the fore is the structure of economics. In order for any political system to work, it must have the power to control the economic system. Failure to have such power will bring political chaos to that system. It is like a body that has no blood: It will die.

When 'Aho'eitu was sent down to earth as king to the people of Tonga, he was sent with legal authority to rule over the land. He was inaugurated to be the representative of Hikule'o (the god of fertility) on earth. Such empowerment was done in the name of religion. 'Aho'eitu was not only empowered to rule over the people, but also to rule over the very entity of the land that was indispensable to survive in a feudal society. The land not only stood as the sole means for economic survival but also spelled out the magnitude of the power of the person who had it.

The kingdom of ‘Aho‘eitu was bound to survive for a long, long time, and the interplay of the three important factors—religion, economy, and politics—was crucial to this formation of politics in Tonga. Lest we forget, it must also be mentioned that ethics played an important role in the formation of politics in Tonga through these myths.

REFERENCES

Biersack, Aletta. *Kava'onau and the Tongan Chiefs*. J.P.S. Vol. 100 (3), University of Oregon, 1991.

Gibbs, Lee W. and W. Taylor Stevenson, (eds.), *Myth and the Crisis of Historical Consciousness*. Montana: Scholars Press, 1975.

Havea, Siotame. "An Ethical Perspective on Tongan Identities and Theological Identities." MTh Thesis, University of Auckland, 1997.

Latukefu, Sione. *Church and State in Tonga*. Canberra: Australia National University, 1980.

Martin, John. *Tonga Islands: William Mariner's Account*. Tonga: Vava'u Press, 1991.

Artist Credit:

Mr. Paula Mahe is a student at Sia'atoutai Theological College. He has given his permission to use the images in this article.