



Strategic Murders

Social Drama in Tonga's Chiefly System (Western Polynesia)

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Abstract. – This article deals with a chain of social dramas typical of an important part of the civil war in Tonga (Western Polynesia), a period of decline of the paramount chieftainship which was a continuation and intensification of an already existing competition between the Tongan chiefs. Here, this competition and the resulting social dramas – with distant parallels in Hawaiian history – are conceived as rather cyclical than unusual states of warfare. The major research questions of this article are: How was the disintegration of the Tongan system of paramount chieftainship brought about? and: What were its implications? In analyzing a selection of historical ethnography from a political anthropological point of view, the metaphor of social drama, adapted from Victor Turner, will be used as an analytical tool. [*Polynesia, Tonga, chiefs, war, murder, social drama, political anthropology*]

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In the night of 21 to 22 April 1799, during a funeral ritual on Tonga's main island Tongatapu, a high chief was murdered. The funeral, a reburial of the Tu'i Ha'atakalaua Toafunaki, offered an excellent opportunity because on such occasions

notwithstanding their mutual rivalry many chiefs from the numerous Tongan islands were gathered together in a mourning mood over several days. The murder was unexpected. One chief with his warriors lay in wait outside the house of the sleeping victim, whilst the instigator went inside. He wanted his victim to know to whom he owed his death and, therefore, first slapped him with the flat of his hand in the face. The victim woke up, and his murderer shouted: "It's me, Tupouniua, who is beating you!", and then smashed his skull with a war club. The victim's brusquely awakened companions had not the slightest chance of fleeing from the house. Outside, they were confronted with the heavily armed accomplices.

This story derives from the young British sailor William Mariner (Martin 1981: 71), who was a survivor of a capture by the Tongans of his ship, the *Port-au-Prince*, and subsequent massacres. Mariner lived in Tonga between 1806 and 1810. On his return to England, he had his experiences recorded by the London physician John Martin, who published them in 1817. It is no eyewitness account of the murder, but Mariner was particularly well informed, among others by his adopted father, the accomplice to the murder. According to historical anthropology (Bott 1982: 9), the murder marked the "ferocious local wars" from the early 1780s until 1852. During the first part of the war, a period of decline of the paramount chieftainship which lasted till 1826, at least one-fourth of the population died on one of the many battlefields or in the accompanying famines (Wood