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The New Nobility: Tonga's Young Traditional Leaders

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Tonga's progress towards democracy has been slow and, although the country has had as prime minister a 'commoner' and long-time pro-democracy activist, there is still widespread uncertainty about Tonga's political future. The King has retained important executive powers and all aspects of Tongan society are still influenced by the hierarchical ordering of the monarchy, nobility and commoners (*tu'a*). In the context of significant political tensions, an unusual initiative has been occurring quietly in the background since 2012: the formalisation of a group of the children of royal and noble families by a Tongan civil society organisation which is intent on changing, at least to some extent, leadership in Tonga. This chapter examines this group of 'young traditional leaders', asking whether it constitutes a potentially radical development in Tonga's sociopolitical context or whether it simply serves to shore up the power and privilege of the country's traditional elite.

Political Change in Tonga

Members of the royal and noble lineages in Tonga exemplify what has been described as 'indigenous modernity' (Hogan & Singh 2018). They embody 'tradition' and 'culture', but they are also members of a powerful

elite in modern Tonga, and many engage in capitalist enterprises and other aspects of modernity both within and beyond Tonga. Their claims to embody tradition lie in the close connections between the current hierarchical structure and those of Tonga before European contact; although there was no ‘king’ then, the current royal and noble lines can be traced back to the pre-contact ranking system (Bott 1981; James 1992). Tonga’s 1875 Constitution established the royal dynasty that still rules today and appointed some of the former chiefs to noble titles, which are inherited through a system of patrilineal primogeniture. The Constitution also put all of Tonga’s land under the control of the royal family and nobles, dividing the country into estates (*tofi’a*) on which commoners have the right to lease allotments of land. The *kau nōpele*, the holders of the 33 noble titles, vary in their birth rank in relation to the royal family and thus in their power (James 1997, p. 56), but they all exercise considerable authority and privilege in their interactions with commoners, even those who are part of Tonga’s ‘educated elite’ (James 2003).

As well as retaining their crucial role as estate holders, the nobles are also deeply embedded within Tonga’s social structure, which centres on kinship ties and the concept of *ha’a*, or lineage. This further supports their ongoing power in society as traditional authorities within that structure; they are regarded as the heads of *kāinga*—the extended kinship groups that live on their estates (Marcus 1977, 1980). The traditional elite also symbolise the pride that Tongans have in retaining their independence throughout the colonial period.

There has been a pro-democracy movement in Tonga since the 1980s that has influenced changes that have reduced the political power of the nobles (James 1994; Lawson 1994). There was a ‘momentous decision’ in 2010 to amend the Constitution of Tonga to shift most of the monarch’s executive powers to an elected cabinet (Powles 2014a, p. 1). Tonga’s parliament was dominated by nobles until these constitutional reforms also led to a shift in power to elected ‘people’s representatives’, with nobles retaining only nine of the 26 seats (Powles 2014b).¹ In the elections of November 2010, the people of Tonga had more power to choose their leaders than ever

1 Until the reforms of 2010, nobles held an equal number of seats in government as those held by ministers who were elected by the people. Today, certain positions in government can only be held by nobles: the minister of lands, speaker of the house and deputy speaker of the house.

before. The outcome of the subsequent election, in November 2014, was a commoner prime minister, 'Akilisi Pohiva, one of the most outspoken and dedicated pro-democracy campaigners.

During this period of political change, there were sporadic outbreaks of civil unrest in Tonga, from the first street marches in the mid-1980s to the six-week public servants' strike of 2005, and riots in 2006 that destroyed many buildings in Nuku'alofa. More recently, there have been a growing number of scandals involving members of the nobility, from possession of firearms to allegations of involvement in drug running. This has led to increasingly strident criticisms of the traditional elite, publicly by academics (Brown Pulu 2011, 2012), journalists (Moala 2002) and pro-democracy activists, and more privately by many commoners who resent being called on by nobles for services and even money and who regard them as disconnected from their people.

However, ideas upholding the importance of respect and obedience to traditional authority are still deeply entrenched in Tonga. It is still the case that political change is 'readily characterized in terms of tradition versus democracy' (Lawson 1994, p. 113), with many Tongans still unsure of how democracy can work alongside a royal family and the nobility. Even those who support democratic reform, who are well educated and do not 'need' the nobles (and may privately be critical of them), typically defer to their authority and observe the requisite protocols in their presence. As Kerry James (1997, p. 70) concluded of Tonga's nobility:

If the abuses of power can be halted, the Tongan people will be glad to continue to honour those they believe should lead the nation ... [they] do not want to replace their unique system; they only want to be able to trust and respect it.

In the context of calls for democratic reform in the 1990s, Epeli Hau'ofa (1994, pp. 426–427) argued:

Although the aristocracy will always be few in number, Tonga will continue to need them far more than their social and economic contributions to our progress. Like their ancestors, they serve the nation in ways that no one else can; and therein I believe lies their great and continuing importance.

It does seem highly unlikely that Tonga's royal and noble families will lose their places in Tonga's hierarchical society in the foreseeable future, but further change does seem inevitable. As Guy Powles (2013, p. 15) observed:

Another potential crisis may be triggered by threats to abolish the nobles' electorate and throw open all seats in the Assembly to popular vote—where nobles would stand as ordinary candidates. Such a move could encourage the nobles to insist on constitutional privileges that protect them—thus testing the Constitution further.

The head of a prominent civil society organisation in Tonga commented to me that people consider political change 'unfinished business' and that the nobles are 'seeing the walls cracking!' In August 2017, King Tupou VI dissolved the parliament, a sign that he was uneasy with the extent of democratic reform in his country (Fraenkel 2017). In snap elections in November 2017, most of the ministers, including 'Akilisi Pohiva, regained their seats and, eventually, Pohiva was returned as prime minister (Tora 2018).

Young Traditional Leaders

The changing roles of traditional leaders have long been of interest to scholars of the Pacific. As the editors of the volume *Chiefs Today* argued:

Far from premodern relics, the chiefs of modern Pacific states increasingly figure in the rhetoric and reality of national political development ... the renewed significance of chiefs, and the debates and disagreements that surround them, emerge from a collision of discourses of identity and power circulating in the Pacific today ... the status and power of the chief have become public issues in the context of national political change and development. (Lindstrom & White 1997, pp. 3–4)

More than 20 years later, these issues continue to be discussed, but surprisingly little has been written about what is done to prepare younger members of chiefly families to take on either titles or supporting roles in the context of political and social change. For example, for the Cook Islands, Arno Pascht (2014, p. 168) considered the political futures of traditional title holders and described how they draw on the past 'as an important basis of chiefly authority and legitimacy', while also aiming to

ensure that they continue to have ‘political influence and power’. However, he only discusses the existing title holders, not those who will take on those roles in the future. Similarly, a collection of papers on chiefs in Fiji (Pauwels 2015) does not address how younger generations of traditional elites are learning about their roles.²

For Tonga, most discussions about the pro-democracy movement and political change have focused primarily on the monarchy, portraying the nobility as part of the privileged strata of Tongan society without considering in any depth the implications for nobles and their families of the democratic reforms. Perhaps this lack of attention to the younger generation is partly due to the assumption that chiefly titles are ‘ascribed’ rather than achieved and that the roles and responsibilities—and privileges—are simply passed on through the generations. However, as this case study of Tonga shows, it is important to consider not only how the roles of traditional leaders are changing, but also how their children are affected by change, as this can potentially shape the future of their country. Epeli Hau‘ofa (1994, p. 426) observed of Tonga: ‘Like everything else, the aristocracy is changing, and there are signs of reinvigoration in its ranks’. The younger generations, he noted, were better educated than their parents and grandparents and were working in both the public and private sectors using their tertiary qualifications. He also commented that ‘they seem to be more egalitarian in their attitudes than their forebears and may even be more favourably disposed toward an open and democratic system than their elders have understandably been’ (1994, p. 426).

As with commoner Tongans, members of the royal and noble families of Tonga are now scattered across the diaspora and have been since the late 1960s, when waves of Tongan migration to New Zealand, Australia and the US began. All three of King Tupou VI’s children were born in New Zealand and spent many of their formative years in Australia. Even when noble families are based in Tonga, their children are often educated overseas and only visit Tonga occasionally. Many people I have interviewed in Tonga, across different ranks, expressed serious concerns about the current cohort of youth from noble families. A common theme was their ‘disconnection’ from the communities on their families’ estates and with Tongan culture and society more broadly. Those who have spent much of their lives overseas have poor Tongan language skills, and I was

2 The collection includes one paper on Micronesia (Petersen 2015), which also focuses only on the role of chiefs, not on how future leaders learn about that role (see Feinberg 2018).

told that their knowledge of cultural matters may be so limited that some do not even know to which *ha'a* they belong. Some have never been to their family's estate, especially estates on the outer islands, where the local people may never have met the family of their noble.³ As well as being away from Tonga at times, their lack of knowledge was also attributed to a lack of good role models, with some people claiming that parents are not explicitly teaching their children the roles and responsibilities associated with their rank.⁴

Overall, there was agreement that many of these young people lack confidence and feel confused and uncertain about possible changes to the roles and position of the nobility in Tongan society. This is not helped by their sheltered and overprotected existence when in Tonga, in which they grow accustomed to a life of privilege and special treatment. They tend to stay at home much of the time, especially females, as the strict protocols around commoners' interactions with nobility can prevent them from simply mingling with other young people. Poor Tongan language skills also make it more difficult to interact with villagers. The expressions commoners used to describe noble youth is revealing: they are 'in a bubble', 'way over there', 'in their own little world' and 'in a tightly guarded space'. This lack of connection of youth from noble families with the wider community is regarded as adding to people's increasing lack of trust in the nobility.

These future leaders' 'disconnection' and their experience of living overseas also leads to concerns within the nobility that their youth are becoming too independent, that they are struggling with the restrictions on their behaviour and that they are questioning practices such as arranged marriages. It is widely believed that they are facing significant challenges in relation to the expectations placed on them for future leadership: 'privileged but struggling' was how one commoner interviewee described them.

3 In some cases when the noble dies while still relatively young, the people on his estate may not have met his son before he inherits the title.

4 Lack of direct instruction is a common feature of Tongan socialisation, as children are expected to learn primarily by observation (Morton 1996). However, the children of nobles who spend a lot of time overseas have less opportunity for such observation.

Establishment of ‘the Namoa’

It is in this context of concerns for the younger generation of noble and royal families that efforts have been made to bring them together and to provide a form of training, which is strongly influenced by a focus on developmental leadership. This was facilitated through the Pacific Leadership Program (PLP), based in Fiji and funded by the Australian government, which helped to establish several leadership coalitions in the Pacific from 2008. In Tonga, the coalition was the Tonga National Leadership Development Forum (TNLDF), which operated from 2010 through the Civil Society Forum of Tonga, an umbrella body for civil society organisations. TNLDF has as its patron Princess Angelika Lātūfuipeka Tuku‘aho, daughter of King Tupou VI,⁵ and its board members include several nobles and representatives from all sectors of Tongan society.⁶

One of the key activities of the TNLDF was their development of a national leadership code (‘the Code’) through extensive public consultations throughout the whole archipelago; it was launched in December 2013. It is a set of 14 leadership principles and it has shaped the work of TNLDF in its attempts to influence leadership in Tonga, at a time when Tonga is at a critical juncture, with significant political reforms already and the potential for more change in future. To a great extent, the Code reinforces what Tongans now regard as ‘traditional’ values; although there are some standard leadership values such as accountability and transparency, the first principle is to live a religious life, followed by *‘ofa* (love, generosity and compassion), then respect, humility and other

5 The Princess exemplifies the experiences of many young traditional leaders, having spent significant periods outside Tonga. She attended Queen Sālote College in Tonga and lived with King Tupou V when her parents moved to Australia while her father studied. She spent time in Switzerland after high school, then went to university in Canberra in 2010. In 2012, she became the High Commissioner to Tonga and remains based in Canberra. Born in 1983, she has only recently moved out of the category of ‘youth’, as defined in Tonga (15–34).

6 Between 2014 and 2017, I worked as a consultant for the PLP, looking at the work of the TNLDF. I was given ethics approval by La Trobe University (#E16-028) to draw on that work for my research. In addition to participant observation during TNLDF activities, I conducted formal interviews with the Princess, members of the TNLDF board, the TNLDF working committee, members of the Namoa (see below), village youth group leaders and other village youth, leaders of other civil society organisations and other contacts that I have in Tonga from my research with Tongans since the late 1980s.

values that are defined explicitly in relation to Tongan social norms.⁷ The Code shifts the emphasis of the role of leaders from privilege and power to responsibilities, framed within the context of the ideals of what traditional, pre-contact leadership entailed in Tonga. The TNLDF very proudly regard the Code as uniquely Tongan and it has been endorsed by the King and Queen, government ministers and church leaders, with many Tongans signing a pledge to uphold the Code.

At a TNLDF meeting in Ha‘apai 2012, the board discussed how to encourage Tonga’s nobles to accept the Code and decided to start with the younger generation. They formed the Young Tongan Traditional Leaders (YTTL) group and held the first meeting in December 2012 at Vakaloa resort on Tongatapu, facilitated by TNLDF. Only a small proportion of the funding received from the PLP was directed to this group, which is financed primarily by Princess Lātūfuipeka and the parents of its members. In a detailed review of the work of PLP in the Pacific, in the ‘country scan’ for Tonga discussing the local effects of PLP, there is no mention of this group (Barbara & Haley 2014), although it was a crucial aspect of their activities from the perspective of the TNLDF. The TNLDF operate on the assumption that in the foreseeable future, the nobility will continue to play an important role as traditional leaders in Tonga, so the aim is to influence future leaders as part of the TNLDF’s broader agenda of shaping developmental leadership in Tonga.⁸

As well as being a means to encourage Tonga’s future leaders to adopt the Code, TNLDF perceived a need for the younger generation to be a more cohesive group and to learn more about Tongan culture, society and their own families’ histories so they would be prepared for the roles that they would assume as adults. As one board member described it, these young people ‘have extremely few positive role models’. There had been some cases of nobles dying at a young age and their sons inheriting the title without fully understanding the role; TNLDF wanted to ensure that, in the future, young people were more prepared, whether to take on a title or to carry out the many other roles associated with being a member of the

7 The 14 leadership principles (*makatu‘unga*), as translated by TNLDF, are: *mo‘ui faka-e‘otua* (live a religious life); *‘ofa* (love); *faitotonu* (honesty); *faka‘apa‘apa* (respect); *mamabi‘ime‘a* (commitment/loyalty); *tauhi vaha‘a* (maintain relationship); *vahevahe taau* (equality); *fa‘a kataki* (patience/endurance); *tali ui* (accountability); *falala‘anga* (trustworthy); *mo‘ui visone* (visionary); *loto to* (humility); and *mo‘ui lelei fakasino* (healthy).

8 TNLDF is involved in a range of other projects, including developing Tonga’s Green Growth strategy, school leadership programs and local governance initiatives.

traditional elite. At the same time, TNLDF wanted these young people to be aware of change in Tonga and to consider their place in the context of that change.

In 2015, the group changed their name from YTTL to *Namoa 'o e taki Lelei*, after Princess Lātūfuipeka asked King Tupou V for his approval. As she explained on the group's Facebook site:

The term 'Namoa' is the very FIRST pre-mastication (pre-chewing) that is given to a baby by his/her mother/mother figure which in Tonga is a piece of baked coconut. It is believed that the behavior of a person when older is determined from the 'Namoa' that he/she received when still an infant. 'Taki Lelei' is good leader (20 January 2015).

Although the acronym NOETL was initially adopted for the group, members and the TNLDF board quickly referred to it as simply 'the Namoa'—the term that is also used in this chapter.

Membership of the Namoa

Initially, the intention was to include only the heirs to the noble titles, but the Namoa has expanded to include the younger generation of the royal family and any children from noble families, including members from noble–commoner marriages. It also includes children from the families of *matāpule mā'ū tofi'a* (ceremonial attendants holding hereditary estates) and others who are linked by blood to the King, as they could all play important leadership roles in Tonga in the future. Members are invited to join the group by Princess Lātūfuipeka and, once they register as members, they are expected to attend meetings or to send a representative. There are over 100 members, although only some are in Tonga at any given time, as many either live overseas or are away studying or travelling. December seems to be the most active time for the group, when members return to Tonga to spend Christmas with their families. Membership of the Namoa has continued to grow and, in 2017, it expanded to include the children of *tauhifonua* (minor chiefs who care for estates when the title-holding noble is absent). Not all potential members have joined the group; some are not interested and others are part of the Royal Guard and travel with the King, so they do not get involved with the group's activities.

The ages of members range from very young children to young adults, and this presents a challenge when organising activities. The younger children are primarily included in social events, but otherwise all members from about the age of 10 are involved in activities such as meetings and community work, as discussed below. In Tonga, the official category of ‘youth’ extends to 35 years old, so there is a significant span of ages within the Namoa. Another challenge is the respect (*faka’apa’apa*) relationship between brothers and sisters (broadly defined to include cousins), which precludes them from interacting closely. However, Tongans are used to managing that issue.

The group aims to come together two or three times a year, and this is when activities organised by TNLDF often occur. Each of these meetings is hosted by members of a particular *ha’a* as a deliberate attempt to encourage identification with what one member referred to as ‘blood lines, bound together with the common aspirations along those tribe lines’. The Namoa has an executive committee but the group is primarily run by a subcommittee of mostly lower-ranking female members based in Tonga, which meets twice a month to plan ongoing activities. The executive committee has had problems with members leaving Tonga for long periods, tensions between members competing to claim higher rank and with the lack of organisational skills of committee members, but TNLDF board members assert that simply getting committee members from rival *ha’a* to work together has been a considerable achievement.

In 2017, the executive committee was headed by Prince ‘Ata (son of King Tupou VI) as president of the Namoa, and his two deputies were nobles’ sons, Lord Vaha’i and Hon. Tevita ‘Unga Ma’afu. Prince ‘Ata also became a TNLDF board member and its vice-chair, and the secretary of the Namoa committee, Volasinga ‘Ahio Salatielu, has also joined the board. They were welcomed by other board members who want them to be aware of the issues that TNLDF addresses. In addition, they have the opportunity to observe the interactions of the nobles with other board members, as a model of traditional leaders working in a coalition with other Tongans.

The Namoa’s Vision and Mission

Through their work with the TNLDF, the Namoa have developed a vision statement: ‘To give life to Tongan Culture through collaboration, leadership, working together and strengthening ties with the people, land and the environment as a response to change with the influence of custodians’. Their mission statement is that ‘Young Tongan Traditional

Leaders aim to make a positive difference and create value with and for Tonga'.⁹ One of the group's aims is to thus influence the behaviour of future leaders through the National Leadership Code and the activities of the group, to be more in line with the ideal roles of nobility, including those of 'service' and reciprocity.

In a document dated 23 May 2014, the objectives of the group are listed as '5–10 year short-term goals' and '10–20 year long-term goals', with an ambitious list of possible activities, primarily in regard to historical knowledge such as reviving 'old Tongan sports' and promoting Tongan dance and music, as well reviving traditions such as tattoo (*tatau*) and reconnecting 'with relatives from times of Tongan empire'. The goals also involve social issues, including supporting various civil society groups, focusing on health, education and the environment and even involvement in restorative justice and developing 'a village system to restore order and justice and to help deportees on a village level'.

In an interview in June 2014 on The Whatitdo, a website described as an 'Urban island review media platform for Pacific Islanders in sports and entertainment and social community awareness', Princess Lātūfuipeka explained:

We hope to make a difference in leading by example for our people at the village level as that is where our authority lies. To name a few, as young leaders we want to be able to work together as a Ha'a and as Custodians of the land to improve the lives of the people who are under our responsibilities through: promoting a healthy lifestyle by having health talks and fitness programs; encouraging tree planting and cleaning up (*fakama'a kolo*) to deal with environmental concerns; support disable people through volunteer work; revive traditional Tongan sports, dances (*faiva*) and preserving village landmarks (*mātanga fakakolo*); documentation of village history.

9 The vision and mission statement are taken from the document 'YTTL goals final' provided by TNLDF, which appears to have been created by Princess Lātūfuipeka in May 2014. In the workbook distributed to members at a meeting in July 2014, the vision is stated simply as 'give life, value and be proud of our Tongan culture and responsibilities' and the mission is listed as:

- custodian of culture
- traditional responsibilities
- political responsibilities
- community leadership.

As well as emphasising both the ‘authority’ and ‘responsibilities’ of the group, the Princess reveals her broad ambitions. She has further plans to expand its scope—for example, to extend its activities throughout the archipelago, as well as to make connections with traditional leaders in Fiji and Samoa and with Tonga’s diasporic communities. In her interview, she continued: ‘Leading today ought to be responsive to the changes of time such as identity and cultural crises, climate change, and the transfer of knowledge to name a few’. The Princess’s views were echoed by a noble, not part of TNLDF, who described the Namoa as partly about reviving Tongan culture that is perceived to be declining and, in doing so, reviving the role of the nobility and royal family as leaders. He talked about:

how we can evolve that and amend it to make it relevant, and how we have to deal in the future as leaders, while maintaining that which makes it unique. Maintaining the best things and adapting so that we don’t become irrelevant in future.

One of the nobles on the TNLDF board described the Namoa as a ‘long-term investment in the future of the country’.

Managing Protocol, Building Trust

Before describing the activities of the Namoa, it is important to note that it has been extremely challenging for the TNLDF to work with these young traditional leaders. As an independent body, TNLDF has the advantage of not being regarded by Tonga’s elite as jostling for power, but its position is delicate because, in the Tongan context, it is difficult for the youth to be regarded as working with a ‘commoner’ civil society organisation to receive mentoring and advice. The members of the TNLDF working with the group, primarily a ‘working committee’ of commoners, have had to slowly build their trust and confidence. They also have to deal with the protocols surrounding Princess Lātūfuipeka, which makes it difficult for them to talk explicitly or directly with her about the messages that they hope are being conveyed to the members of the Namoa about leadership. However, the leaders of TNLDF, including the nobles on the board, have opportunities to do this when meeting separately with the Princess.

One of the commoner board members observed that the TNLDF needed to be discreet because it was important to gain the trust of the noble families. She said that those families could lose face if the work of the TNLDF with their children was known, because: ‘To be seen as needing

support is not easy for them'. For this reason, there has been little publicity of the activities of the Namoa, although Princess Lātūfuipeka mentioned them in her Christmas message on television in the early stages of the group's development and subsequently in various interviews on social media. Another board member explained that it was important that the information came from the Princess, because if others involved with the TNLDF took that initiative, Tongans would regard them as wanting to raise their own social status or they would assume they were in it for their own advantage. There was also concern that, as the nobility was such a 'tightly guarded space', publicity would 'bring their barriers down' and the TNLDF would lose access to the Namoa.

Despite the concerns about the effects of publicity, there has been a gradual increase in Tongans' awareness of the Namoa. Since 2016, some members of the Namoa have been involved with the TNLDF's media and advocacy program, joining TV and radio panel discussions on the experience of Namoa members and how the Code and the Namoa activities have influenced them in relation to leadership. In 2016 and 2017, my interviews with representatives from other youth groups in Tonga revealed that they knew little about the Namoa, but they all expressed interest in connecting with them and in finding ways to address the significant obstacle of protocols that restrict interactions between noble and commoner youth.

There are also clear indications that the TNLDF has managed to gain the trust of the Namoa members' families. Initially, many adults from those families did not support the group and were not convinced that it would make any difference either to the young people involved or to Tongan society. In addition, the parents' generation was focused on the longstanding rivalries between noble families. Gradually, they have increased their support and many now encourage their children to take part in the activities. Another group that had to be won over included the 'nannies' of these young people: the 'ladies in waiting' who accompany them when in public and who tend to be overprotective of their charges. According to members of the TNLDF's working committee, during the early events organised for the Namoa, the 'nannies' and/or parents would be present and members would seek their approval to join in activities. As trust in the TNLDF grew, the nannies and parents began dropping the children and youth at Namoa activities or waiting outside rather than watching their every move.

‘Training’ the Namoa

The activities organised for the Namoa have changed significantly over time. Initially, they held events that reflected their privileged status: beach parties, dinners at Tonga’s best restaurants and day trips to the small islands near Tongatapu that have tourist resorts. They held events such as a games day for the children, in which they could simply have fun and get to know each other. Previously, these young people tended to only see each other a few times a year at functions, during which they sat and watched proceedings rather than interact with each other. As they became more comfortable with each other, the TNLDF introduced some formal workshops, or ‘training’, and the first included a discussion that was facilitated by Princess Lātūfuipeka on the importance of earning respect rather than expecting it. The TNLDF surveyed members in 2013 to discover what they were interested in learning about and, consequently, workshops and activities have been developed around two key themes: Tongan history and culture, and current social issues.

Training has included Tongan language, such as public speaking and the three registers of language for commoners, nobles and the royal family, and key Tongan values. Facilitators and guest speakers from a range of organisations, government departments, the church and judiciary have been involved in the workshops, which have been organised mainly by the one paid staff member of the TNLDF, Mr Manitasi Leger. A workshop held in 2015 acknowledged the challenges that the Namoa members face, including having to speak at events in Tonga, balancing traditional obligations with personal and social obligations and even being nervous and lacking confidence. The Leadership Code is a strong focus throughout the workshops, and a noble’s wife, whose children are Namoa members, proudly said they know the Code by heart.

As well as formal ‘training’, the Namoa are encouraged to apply their learning through their community work. As part of the focus on history, members have developed projects in which they visit people in the villages on their family’s estate to learn about the history of the area and of their *ha’a*.¹⁰ This has been limited to some villages on Tongatapu, but the

10 Some of the Namoa talked enthusiastically about wanting to collect and document all the historical data collected by the Namoa members and even about making documentaries, but, given the lack of funding, this seems unlikely to occur.

group aims to extend this activity throughout the Kingdom.¹¹ In some of these villages, the Namoa have designed storyboards for roadside signs to display aspects of local history, and, at their meetings, the members tell each other what they have learned about their village, *ha'a*, local place names, and so on. They are asked to report on what involvement they have had with their *kāinga* and community. As well as responding to the survey of members' interests, the TNLDF board saw this focus on history as a way for these young people to understand their role and position in Tongan society.

Preparation for the coronation of Tupou VI in July 2015 saw a surge in activities involving members of the Namoa working in some of the villages on Tongatapu, primarily to research historical information, but to also ensure that the villages were cleaned and decorated for the event. This included rubbish collection, in which Princess Lātūfuipeka herself participated. These village clean-ups were followed by 'inspections' (*a'ahi*) in which some of the Namoa would visit a village and observe what had been achieved. The coronation itself also involved some of the Namoa, who the King appointed as liaison officers to assist VIP guests. A TNLDF working committee member observed that while those young people had been 'born to be served', they were now helping others and willingly being involved in a range of activities.

After the coronation, the focus shifted to issues relevant to the community, such as climate change, the environment, livelihood issues and a range of other topics. TNLDF wanted to ensure that the training activities aligned with national planning, such as Tonga's Sustainable Development Framework, and to internationally recognised development aims, such as the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals. The Namoa began planning some of their own activities and events, rather than these being driven solely by TNLDF—but the TNLDF continued to offer monthly workshops for Namoa members who were in Tonga, which aimed to build their capacity as leaders. The workshops emphasise group work and discussion and encourage the members to feel more comfortable interacting with each other and with public speaking.

11 A long-term aim is to link to Tongan youth groups overseas and encourage them to visit the country to learn its history, with organised tours, homestays and so on.

It is inevitable that the focus of the workshops on the roles that these young people play as members of the nobility to some extent reinforces their view of themselves as members of the elite in Tongan society. However, the TNLDF's aim is to consistently challenge them to consider what that means in terms of their responsibilities in the context of political reform and the changing social, political and economic environment of Tonga. There has also been emphasis on their responsibilities to the physical environment, with a focus on the effects of climate change. The workshops aim to lay the groundwork for a new generation of traditional leaders who are focused more on their responsibilities than on the privileges that come with their birthright. Yet there has been little explicit discussion of how nobles' roles in the political arena could or should change in future, and no discussion of contentious issues such as land reform. The focus is squarely on their traditional roles and how they can best uphold them in the current context.¹²

Another topic that has not received much focus in the workshops is gender, although the TNLDF is proud that the Namoā has provided opportunities for young women to be involved in the committee. The Princess herself admitted that the women 'run the show' and that they are more involved with organising Namoā activities. The Namoā's involvement with village youth has also included females and they participate in workshop activities such as building confidence in public speaking. Yet there has been no attempt to address the fundamental gender inequalities of everyday life in Tonga, and there has been a reinforcement of what I have called elsewhere the myth of female privilege (Lee 2017). Perhaps not surprisingly, there has been no discussion of whether women could or should hold noble titles.

Community Chapters

The work of Namoā members in villages led to the formation of 'community chapters' in some villages, in which members work closely with the young people of the village. Together, they carry out projects such as installing a water tank for a poor family or building a ramp for a disabled man to access his home. TNLDF organises these projects, liaising between the Namoā and village youth, so the Namoā can observe for themselves

12 One of the nobles, a government minister not on the TNLDF board was enthusiastic about this 'training' and said that he would like to see the Namoā formalised and incorporated, to run a formal academy for the children of the traditional elite.

the extent of poverty in Tonga—all the while aiming to inspire them to want to address the growing inequalities. The chapters also give the young nobles ‘a platform for them to exercise leadership’, as a TNLDF board member explained, again with the aim of seeing leadership as involving responsibilities. Another aim is to increase acceptance of youth leadership within the village; some elderly villagers have opposed youth involvement in community chapters, as for them it challenges their ideas of appropriate social roles. By encouraging youth leadership within villages, TNLDF hopes to inspire village youth to be more proactively involved with their community rather than simply waiting to carry out elders’ instructions.

One of these community chapters was established in Pea village, on the King’s estate, and it organised a week-long celebration in January 2015. Princess Lātūfuipeka was very involved and helped the community chapter to organise an array of activities, such as a sports day, various competitions and production of signboards using the historical information that the youth collected from the elders of the village. The King and Queen toured the village during the week and people dressed as they did in ancient Tonga. A community chapter youth leader said that the event had helped give youth a sense of pride in the history of their village and that they had been able to feel a sense of ownership in the process of planning the week’s activities. He also explained that the village youth who had been involved were motivated by wider concerns regarding youth unemployment, school dropouts and problems with alcohol consumption and associated violence.

The events that I observed that brought together village youth and the Namoa were a fascinating mixture of traditional protocol and informality. One was a tree planting ceremony held on Sia Ko Veiongo, a small hill near the royal palace in Nuku‘alofa, where the very early stages of what was planned as a tourist attraction had been constructed. The top of the hill had been landscaped and the event was to plant heilala trees, which can only be planted by members of the royal family. A structure had been erected to provide shade for the special guest, Princess Lātūfuipeka, who was seated on an ornate chair placed on layers of woven pandanus mats, with tables on either side of her holding flower arrangements, a fine china teapot and cup, and a tiered cake stand with small cakes. Children and youth from Kolomotu‘a, a village that has now merged with the urban sprawl of Nuku‘alofa, were present, as were members of the Namoa. While the village youth stayed on the fringes, the younger children sat in front of the Princess, on the ground, as did a leading member of TNLDF who

made a speech welcoming her. A village youth leader gave an emotional speech, followed by a speech by a member of the Namoa, then a song by the children and youth. Despite the formality and observance of protocol, the Princess was wearing casual clothes—a T-shirt and black pants, a straw hat and runners—and, after the speeches and singing, she used a shovel to move some dirt around one of the heilala trees, to symbolically plant it, then spent some time joking with the village youth and posing for photographs with them.

Another event was an ‘inspection’ in the Hihifo (Western) district of Tongatapu that was organised in June 2016, following work that was undertaken by members of the Namoa and community chapters in 12 villages to research the history of the villages and identify culturally significant sites that need restoration work. To prepare for the event, the son of the village noble made all the arrangements that usually would have been done by his father or the ‘talking chief’. The son, a member of the Namoa, did this through his work with youth leaders in the village; thus, it became a direct exercise in leadership training for both noble and commoner youth. The usual presentations that would be involved in a royal visit to a village were pared back to a token gift, to ensure that the visit was not a burden for the village. One TNLDF board member claimed that through activities like this, they were ‘shaking the whole structure but in a way that’s acceptable’ to both nobles and commoners.

The Hihifo visit began in the village of Kala‘au, with great excitement; women danced and clowned in the street and the villagers gathered to watch. Princess Lātūfuipeka and Prince Ata arrived—breaking protocol by attending without the ‘talking chiefs’ who would normally accompany them—and, with other members of the Namoa and representatives from the village, they took their places in the village hall while villagers cheered outside. The token gift of kava root and sugar cane was presented by a young man of the village, followed by speeches and a hymn, then two members of the Namoa (male and female) introduced themselves and explained which *ha’a* they were from. Afterwards, a procession of vehicles with the Princess, the Namoa, the TNLDF representatives and villagers drove through the Hihifo district using their car horns to announce their presence and express their excitement. They finished their journey at the large town hall in Kolovai village, where there were more speeches, including the Princess speaking proudly about the Namoa and their work with village youth. After the meeting, food that had been gifted by villagers during the visit was divided up and given to people to take home.

The Princess and the Namoa

Although facilitated by the PLP through the TNLDF, the Namoa are also strongly influenced by their patron, Princess Lātūfuipeka, who has often spoken out about the responsibilities of leadership. In a speech that she gave at the Australian Professional Pacific Women Symposium in August 2014,¹³ she reflected:

Leadership does not materialize because you gain a specific position, a pay grade or a level of seniority or popularity. Instead, leadership is about the choice you make to influence and the freedom to accept personal responsibilities.

She talked about ‘positive change’ and working ‘collaboratively with community leaders’, emphasising that Tonga’s National Leadership Code enables communities ‘to hold their leaders accountable’. The Princess spoke of the Namoa as ‘a lifelong dream of mine’ and recited its vision and mission. In another interview, on *The Whatitdo* (2014), she says of the Namoa:

We are inspired by participative leadership which necessitates that leadership is practiced through involvements and commitments at the village level. I believe that a better Tonga is built through participatory commitments beginning at the basic levels of our society.

One of the TNLDF board members observed that the Princess’s role with the Namoa has not been easy, as she has to negotiate ‘a social minefield’ in the relationships between noble families. Given the competition and rivalry between *ha’a*, she sees it is as ‘a miracle’ that their children are able to meet together as the Namoa. She explained that during the early meetings facilitated by TNLDF, the youth were uncomfortable with each other because of that rivalry, adding: ‘It’s all about power and authority’. From her perspective, getting the young people comfortable with each other is an important step: ‘You can’t measure the impact of their conversations’. Another board member claimed that there has also been an effect on the parents’ generation, with nobles collaborating more, especially within their *ha’a*. However, the TNLDF are also realistic and acknowledge that

13 www.youtube.com/watch?v=HRHL_YGX3HQ.

rivalry between nobles is likely to continue. Even within the Namoa, there are political struggles in which members use their relative closeness to the Princess, and thus to the King, as a way to seek power within the group.

Another important role that Princess Lātūfuipeka has played for the Namoa has been through the Facebook page that she established, assisted by her cousin who uploads her posts and Manitasi Leger from TNLDF who also adds content.¹⁴ She also set up a private Facebook page for the Namoa committee members. The main page began in August 2013, with a picture from 2012 of some Namoa members at their first meeting, at the Vakaloa beach resort. By 2015, long posts started appearing that focused on Tongan history, legends and tradition, primarily about Tongan royalty and nobility. These were particularly frequent when the Namoa was focused on collecting histories in their villages and when the content was often of an idealised past, emphasising the role of nobles in redistribution and service.¹⁵ The posts trailed off after late 2015 and began again in late 2017, with posts by TNLDF about the final PLP event, after its funding was ended, until mid-2018 when posts stopped, suggesting that the Princess now uses one or more of the closed groups and that TNLDF is no longer contributing. Namoa members also use email, phones, Skype and other social media that enable them to stay in touch, despite being geographically scattered for much of the time.

Transforming Tongan Traditional Leadership?

The involvement of PLP, via TNLDF, in the Namoa could be viewed as a form of neo-colonialism. Having a program funded by a foreign government overseeing a training program for young traditional leaders has unsettling echoes of the training for the elite in the colonies before foreign powers withdrew. Tonga had escaped that process to a large extent, as it was never formally colonised, and Tongans' pride in their independence has become an integral part of their identity. Even with TNLDF, this resistance to external influence has been obvious, as they have engaged in

¹⁴ www.facebook.com/Namoa-o-e-Taki-Lelei-218694194955558/.

¹⁵ There are now other Facebook pages, such as the closed groups 'Royal Tongan Dynasties/Nobles Forum' with 5,263 members; 'Royal Tongan Dynasties Forum' with 20,501 members; and 'The Kingdom of Tonga: Royal Dynasties', with 10,817 members, indicating many Tongans' ongoing fascination with their traditional leaders.

activities that the PLP did not consider valuable, including all the time and effort spent on developing the National Leadership Code (Barbara & Haley 2014, p. 34). If this was a neo-colonial attempt to manipulate leadership in Tonga, it has been largely ineffective.

Within Tonga, some of those who know of the Namoa consider it simply reinforcing the existing power structures, with the young members learning to take their privileged position for granted. I was told that the group is 'elitist and conservative' and that the members 'are not learning anything new'. Even a PLP staff member described it as an 'elite social club'. An unintentional consequence of forming the Namoa has been to further shore up the nobility; bringing the young people together has enabled some to find marriage partners. A TNLDF board member commented that this was causing 'dramas', as mothers vied to push their daughters towards partners as high ranking as possible. However, the wife of a noble commented that the Namoa was making things easier for everyone by helping ensure that 'nobles marry nobles', as there was growing concern among Tonga's elite about the increasing number of marriages to commoners as young people resisted arranged marriages.

Despite claims of elitism, the TNLDF board members view the Namoa as one of the coalition's greatest achievements. They argue that because many of the Namoa were so disconnected from Tongan language and culture, some of them would have been unable to function in their traditional roles once they reached adulthood, without the training TNLDF provided. Further, they believe that their training gives Namoa members the opportunity to think critically about their future roles in the context of social, cultural, economic and political changes in Tonga. They hope that this will prevent future leaders from abusing the privileges and power of their position and make them more likely to be involved in addressing the very serious problems Tonga faces.

As one noble explained, there are still significant barriers, particularly nobles' tendency to focus on their lineage and estates while shoring up their own power, rather than thinking of the whole country. This has affected the Namoa; for example, they are only involved in community chapters in the villages that are associated with their family. Yet, a male member of the group in his early 20s claimed, 'Namoa has brought us nationalism', meaning that they now choose what is best for the group as a whole, not just their own family line. The TNLDF also seems to have succeeded in linking the Namoa more closely with other young people

in Tonga, through the community chapters. The leader of a key youth organisation in Tonga told me that the Namoa are now more involved with the wider community—‘hanging out’ with other youth in their village, sitting in kava circles with commoners, attending town hall meetings, and so on. She described the relationships between nobility and commoners as ‘closing up’. This has also been influenced by the community projects with which the Namoa have been involved. Some Namoa members in Kolomotu‘a have joined homework sessions with other village youth that are run by teachers. Others are involved with coaching other youth with their homework. If this continues, the TNLDF is considering bringing in other extra-curricular activities such as traditional dancing, in which the Namoa could be involved with village youth.

All of this is occurring at a time when it seems that commoner youth are far less interested in Tonga’s traditional leadership than previous generations. A Tongan-based journalist told me in 2013 that during her regular visits to high schools to give classes in media studies, she found that youth had little interest or knowledge of the royal or noble families and their activities. Even within those families, some young people are uncertain about the future of Tonga’s hierarchical social structure. The wife of a noble expressed concern about her daughter, who lived overseas and who was ‘seeing things differently’ and questioning her position, despite her parents’ attempts to convince her that there is a cultural expectation of her to ‘look after’ their people. Undoubtedly, the nobles have already lost some of their authority; as one told me: ‘The days when you tell someone something to do and they do it because of who you are, those days are done’. One of the aims of the TNLDF is to encourage people to think critically about leadership, to hold leaders to account—but even the commoner board members do not envisage an end to the nobility, regarding traditional leaders as fundamental to Tongans’ identity. As a leading member of the TNLDF told me: ‘You can’t be Tongan without nobles’.

Conclusion

Whether or not the work that the TNLDF has done with the Namoa will change Tonga’s leadership or commoners’ views of traditional leaders, remains to be seen. With the support of Princess Lātūfuipeka, they have attempted to use both the Namoa and the National Leadership Code to

emphasise the cultural aspects of Tongan leadership as a way to restore legitimacy to traditional leadership in Tonga. The early emphasis of the TNLDF's activities with the Namoa was strongly on tradition and culture and the reaffirmation of the existing roles of the nobility, yet, over time, they focused increasingly on the implications of change and ongoing social and environmental issues. They have encouraged the Namoa members to be 'developmental leaders' and have tried to restore trust in the royalty and nobility by having the Namoa interact with people at the village level, through the community chapters, so they are regarded as having the best interests of the people as their priority. TNLDF is acting to prolong the role and authority of the traditional leaders while trying to prevent the next generation from abusing the privileges and power of their position and to make them more likely to uphold their responsibilities as leaders. This is a tricky balancing act, but the TNLDF board is convinced that this is the only way to effect real change in Tonga.

This was not what the PLP had in mind for the activities of this coalition, which caused significant tensions between them. PLP was looking for more immediate effects on the current leadership, while the TNLDF insisted on focusing on the future and pinning its hopes on long-term, gradual change. In addition, the board members argued that because so many of the Namoa members were disconnected from Tongan culture, with some not even speaking Tongan, they would be unable to meet the expectations of their roles once they reached adulthood, so they required the TNLDF's intervention through its workshops and other activities.

The Australian government closed PLP at the end of 2017, so the TNLDF lost its funding. The members of the TNLDF board all assured me that they will continue the work regardless of funding,¹⁶ and certainly they are all passionate about nurturing a new generation of traditional leaders who, ideally, will uphold the principles of the National Leadership Code. It will be fascinating to see what happens, including with the future of the Namoa.

16 The most recent post on the TNLDF Facebook site is from July 2018, but this does not necessarily mean the coalition is inactive; the sole staff member paid through PLP funds was responsible for updating the site and lost his position when the funding ceased.

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