Every human society must resolve at least two fundamental questions: first, how to live together and second, how to survive together, that is, in particular, how to produce together. We are among those who think these are separate questions, and will concern ourselves here with only the first. To inquire into how to go about living together ultimately comes down to inquiring into the ways of managing the conflicts inherent in any society. Obviously a strongly hierarchical traditional society does not manage internal conflicts in the same way as a liberal Western society.

We will attempt to address one aspect of the problem which is relatively frequent in what we are accustomed to call third-world countries, namely the passage from a traditional hierarchical society to a liberal society in which democracy is held to be the political ideal. Rapidly, to borrow Max Weber’s distinction between charismatic traditional authority and legal-rational authority, we will distinguish, on the one hand, a society in which potential conflicts between social groups are downplayed or even suppressed by traditional authority and, on the other hand, a so-called liberal democratic society, accustomed to settle its conflicts by majority rule, notably through elected representation.

Beyond this very important matter of political democracy, the aspiration to a new way of managing society and its conflicts, we would like to elucidate the issue of identity at stake in these new political conflicts, for we feel strongly that a traditional regime cannot be reduced, for example, to a simple hierarchical organisation, or democracy to majority rule alone. Traditional regime or democracy refer to specific conceptions of society and therefore to different social identities.

Political conflict, conflict of identity

For our study of the issue of identity underlying the passage from a traditional society to a liberal democratic form, we will take the example of the last independent Polynesian
kingdom still in existence, the Kingdom of Tonga. Tonga is well known in anthropological literature for two basic reasons. The first has to do with its kinship system, the second with its strongly ranked social stratification, and it is this second point which interests here. Furthermore, when we speak of Tongan tradition or traditional Tongan society, it must be kept in mind that we are talking about a neo-tradition set in place in the course of the 1870s, a combination of an earlier original tradition and elements of western culture. G. Marcus suggests calling this neo-tradition a ‘compromise culture’. 3

Several authors over the last few years have taken an interest in the evolution of in Tonga’s political situation, emphasising the rise of an important current of opposition which calls itself the ‘Pro-Democracy’ movement. And it is true that we have seen a prodigious evolution in this area since the 1980s, reflected, for example, in the emergence of a vigorous press as well as by the opposition’s spectacular results in the legislative elections following an unusually bitter campaign.

In many instances, the above authors stress the tradition/democracy opposition and as a rule assimilate the idea of democracy to modernity. However, beyond the political battle, what interests here is the conflict surrounding identity. We postulate that, in Tonga today, by means of the political conflicts obviously connected with the essential evolutions in society — in terms of social stratification and the economy — another debate is being conducted, another conflict. This debate, this conflict bear on the question of identity. The question is, what does it mean to be Tongan today, what shape should the collective future of Tongan society take? The question is, since we are talking about identity, what should the relationship to the other be, which in turn raises the question of nationalism, perhaps even of xenophobia. We will see that, contrary to what one might expect, this debate is not simply about an opposition between tradition and democracy, even if it does have something to do with this, too. We will note that the staunchly avowed partisans of democracy are also defenders of tradition, or at least of some aspects and vice versa, that some of the fiercest partisans of the royal family are active modernisers. In other words, the present political debate reveals a typology of attitudes based on a cross between a democracy/royalty dimension, on the one hand, and a tradition/modernity dimension, on the other; between a democracy/royalty dimension and an economic development/non-development dimension.

The birth of democratic claims

It must first of all be said that, when it comes to theory, Western-style democracy is often associated with individualism: for instance, in principle each elector goes into the voting booth alone, and there makes his decision and marks his choice. Certain authors have even assimilated the democratic process to the operation of the market. Thus some partisans of democracy in Tonga claim that the first elements of democracy were introduced in Tongan society, at the end of a difficult civil war, by King Tupou I, the direct ancestor of the present king, as well as by missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century. But whether it was the King or the Wesleyan missionaries who lent him their support and aid, the seeds of democracy are supposed to have been sown insofar as freedoms and elements of individualism were set in place by the granting of a constitution and by the new Christian
religion. In passing, it should be noted that Tonga has one of the world’s oldest constitutions and that, unlike those of most of the other South Pacific countries, drawn up in a context of anti-colonial struggle, Tonga’s Constitution was bestowed on the people from above, by the king.

It is perhaps paradoxical to defend the idea of the seeds of democracy having been sowed by Tupou I, so little is Tongan royalty inclined to democratic ideas, but this paradox is only superficial. To be sure, King Tupou I instituted a genuine State, eminently centralised and hierarchically ordered, in which the king is, even today, invested with considerable powers, the like of which are enjoyed by no contemporary head of State except in totalitarian dictatorships. In addition, to replace the relatively numerous and flexible former chiefs, the King created a narrow, rigidly defined nobility, endowed with important revenues (from land-holdings through something like a fief system) and broadly defined rights. This political system, playing on words, calls itself a Constitutional Monarchy, but it bears no more than a surface resemblance to a liberal social regime. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that King Tupou I also established an embryonic democracy and favoured the appearance of the first signs of individualism. King Tupou’s 1875 Constitution, the bulk of which is still in force, replaced the old system of customary law. In his speech, presenting the Constitution to Parliament, the king declared:

The form of our government in the days past was that my rule was absolute, and that my wish was law and that I chose who should belong to the Parliament and that I could please myself to create chiefs and alter titles. But that, it appears to me, was a sign of darkness and now a new era has come to Tonga — an era of light — it is my wish to grant a Constitution and to carry on my duties in accordance with it.6

He in effect instituted a rule of law, a State where, at least in principle, no one is above the law, which already implies a certain form of equality. And indeed, for example, the royal government was found guilty several times after having been taken to court by its citizens.

It is also important to point out that, of the three parts into which the Constitution is divided, the first is a declaration of rights. This declaration has thirty-two articles guaranteeing, in particular, the equality of everyone before the law,7 chiefs or commoners, Tongans or foreigners, as well as personal freedom, freedom of speech, of worship and of the press. It provides for a Parliament, one that is far from being a model of democracy8 to say the least, but which has the merit of still allowing the expression of differing opinions. It grants the right to vote to all men, whereas previously commoners played strictly no role in political life.9 At the same time, the declaration that all land belonged to the king and therefore could not be sold, as well as the institution of the right of every man over the age of sixteen to the enjoyment of a piece of land which could be passed on to the eldest son, signified a considerable break with collective life, a break with the traditional organisation into groups of households headed by a chief. This in turn led to the gradual constitution of a nation of individual small ‘land-owners’.

Severe criticisms, bearing essentially on the failure to respect civil equality or on the separation of powers, were made of the Constitution. On several occasions one of the most
knowledgeable people in this area, the historian Sione Latukefu, voiced the opinion that it was non-democratic because systems based on chiefs are by their very essence non-democratic. It nevertheless remains that the texts decreed by King Tupou I — reduction of the chiefs’ powers, abolition of serfdom, creation of courts of law, land reform, elections, etc. — even if not always applied in full, sowed seeds of equality and individualism, at least in the minds of some. To be sure, these seeds would take time to sprout, but they would at least have had the great merit of having existed.

Although they rapidly threw their support behind those in power so as to have an easier time establishing themselves upon their arrival in the nineteenth century, the Churches clearly worked in the same direction, sowing their own seeds of equality and individualism. The first of these was the declaration that all men are equal before God, granting each Tongan a soul and thus the possibility of going to heaven, depending on each individual’s efforts. In traditional religion, only the chiefs had the right to an afterlife, and upon dying would go to the world beyond, Pulotu. In addition, the Churches constructed their own hierarchies in parallel to the traditional ranks, and the religious leaders may sometimes have appeared as rival authorities to the classical chiefs. Thus the Churches today are a means of social advancement and participate in the growth of the new middle classes. Later we will see the crucial role played by these Churches in the debate on democracy and identity.

These seeds, sown at the end of the nineteenth century, sprouted and grew only upon activation of certain powerful factors, which contributed to the flowering of democratic claims. They began to sprout notably with Tonga’s entry into a capitalist market economy and its transmutation into a consumer society, with all this represents in terms of individual enterprise and ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. In a newly fledged capitalist country, to be an entrepreneur is first of all to be individualistic, as opposed to community-minded, and this means claiming one’s place in the sun. The demand increases as soon as the entrepreneur becomes aware of the place he occupies in the economic life and development of the country. The advent of the nuclear family has also encouraged individualism, which is favourable to democratic claims. As one manager said to us, ‘I work so my children can have butter on their bread in the morning, the extended family comes afterwards’. Three other factors must also be taken into account. These are education, emigration and the changes in the social structure.

Tonga is a third-world country where education is valued in the extreme, and has been since the arrival of the missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Speaking about education, the same King Tupou I declared:

See what knowledge has done for the white man! See what ignorance has done for the men of this land! Is it that white men are born more wise? Is it that they are naturally more capable than others? No: but they have obtained knowledge...

Thus the kingdom of Tonga has a very high level of schooling and education, which is fairly rare in the third world. A veritable education boom is now underway, even if some aspects have drawn criticism. One of the reasons often given in justification of internal migration to the capital is that is where the best schools are. A high proportion of Tongan families send
their children abroad for the same reason. Many Tongans attend foreign universities, quite often in countries with a liberal political tradition, where they discover Western democracy. To this must be added the existence of a secondary school and a micro-university, both private, neither Church nor State affiliated, which is most exceptional in Tonga. The two establishments, created by F. Helu — an astonishing figure whose essential reference is Periclean Greece — the objective of which is to develop critical thinking, have played a striking role in the birth of the democratic spirit owing to the uncontested intellectual reputation of their founder. The latter is one of the very few Tongans familiar with both traditional and Western cultures. Perhaps the common people’s remarkable thirst for knowledge has some connection with their will to outdo the chiefs and nobles.

Alongside education, the role of emigration in the emergence of the debate on democracy is worth noting. Since the 1960s–1970s, Tonga has become a land of emigrants, and its principal export is now labour. This was once part of an explicit government policy, conceived as a safety valve for demographic pressure. Moreover, this policy was supported by the mainstream Churches. There are no official statistics on emigration, but estimates vary between 35,000 and 50,000 for the number of Tongans living outside the country. Whatever the true figure, it is high if one remembers that the population of the archipelago is only some 100,000 inhabitants. Although it is impossible to arrive at a very accurate evaluation, the sums of money and the various goods these emigrants send back to their families in Tonga represent the country’s primary source of revenue. Since the vast majority of emigrants live in liberal democracies (New Zealand, Australia, the United States), it is not surprising that democratic ideas also filter back through this channel. Tongans living abroad have their own press, which can also be found in Tonga. They have kept up solid ties with their homeland through the family network and return to Tonga, in not negligible numbers, to vacation or attend social events such as weddings, funerals, the anniversary of the founding of some institution (school, church, etc.).

Lastly, the social structure, which Tupou I had worked to stabilise and perpetuate, has considerably evolved towards a broad diversification. Under this king, things were relatively simple: there was a steep pyramid with the royal family at the top, then a limited number of titled nobles, spokesmen for the nobility, and finally the common people, most of whom worked the land. For a variety of reasons we will not go into here, the mass of commoners grew in complexity, spawning new social classes (bourgeoisie, middle classes, big farmers, etc.), even though peasants remained the largest social group. Intellectuals made their appearance. Today this very important modification of the social structure has produced a diversity of opinion in the country which is not usually encountered in a traditional society.

**The democracy debate**

At first the debate on democracy was not easy to spot. One simply observed that the political discussions in the ‘kava clubs’ were taking on more importance, that certain intellectuals attempted to bring problems of Tongan society into the discussion. In particular, they broadcast a radio program critical of the government. The program would be silenced by an authoritarian decision of the same government in 1985, and one of its principal
broadcasters, 'Akilisi Pohiva, a National Education teacher, would be purely and simply fired. In 1986, following these events, the program was replaced by a modest bimestrial newsletter, *Kele'a*, the primary aim of which was to denounce corruption, excesses and mismanagement within the State. It is noteworthy that the newsletter’s four founders were all teachers or ex-teachers having attended universities abroad. Subsequently, three of the four were to be elected to Parliament as People’s Representatives. Although this institution was not truly a place for legislative innovation or a real means of monitoring government activity, it would serve as a sounding board for *Kele’a* campaigns, and all the more effectively as some of the parliamentary debates were broadcast on radio. Little by little, with the election of some of its leaders, the significance of the newsletter’s campaigns would evolve, and the periodical would become the rallying point for the most committed members of the opposition. Then would come a shift from simple denunciation of excesses and corruption to open demands for the right to monitor government activity and for accountability.

'Akilisi Pohiva, who had become one of the main opposition leaders, justified this demand, arguing in substance: the monarchy as it stood was fairly adequate in the context of a subsistence economy since in this case accountability is not a real problem; but in a money economy, taxpayers have a right to expect of a responsible government services in exchange for their taxes and an accounting of the use of public funds. In his own words: ‘the cornerstone of a money market economy is that there must be accountability.’ But these demands struck at the very heart of tradition. This was in itself a scandal, a sacrilege even, in a society as strongly hierarchical as Tonga’s. It effectively meant that the elected representatives of the people could demand accounts of the ministers, nobles for the most part (and some members of the royal family to boot), appointed for life by the king as he pleased, and accountable to him alone. It was tantamount to challenging the king himself. The sacrilegious aspect of this claim can be seen only if one knows that, according to tradition, the present king unites in his own person three royal lines, the most ancient of which is of divine origin, the first ruler having been born, according to the creation myth, from the union of a mortal woman with a god. The Speaker of the House expressed his personal feelings about this veritable scandal for the traditionally minded when he said, in 1989: ‘What I have noticed during these last three years is that People’s Representatives have upped themselves and they are looking down on chiefs and Ministers.’ In this context, the demand to oversee ministerial activities has little chance of succeeding. In effect, while the law indeed stipulates that the Parliament can impeach a minister, the cases in which this can be done are highly circumscribed. Furthermore, as the elected People’s Representatives can in no case form a parliamentary majority, owing to the constitutional provisions (see note 7), this procedure is entirely theoretical and the government cannot be censured in reality, except in very rare cases.

The final step in the democratic debate was taken at a massive Convention held in the capital of the country, Nuku’alofa, in November 1992, on the Tongan Constitution and Democracy. In the course of this convention, nearly all of Tonga’s intellectuals, those living locally or abroad, spoke, as did many pastors and priests. This new stage produced the idea of a new Constitution, one which would reduce the royal function to the same role as that of the British or the Dutch rulers. F. Helu declared, in particular: ‘The Tongan monarch should
be apolitical as is the British monarch. This was nearly *lèse-majesté*, a radical challenge to tradition, to the ‘Tongan Way’ (*faka Tonga*), even if the democrats took care not to speak in these terms.

There would be a split within the opposition. For a number of the active critics of corruption and the excessive salaries paid Members of Parliament, who agreed on the need to monitor government activities, this was going too far. They considered that it mattered not so much to change the Constitution as to apply it in full. Such was, for example, the position of a well-known People’s Representative, Laki Niu. This New Zealand-educated lawyer had been a very active member of the opposition. Yet, as a committed royalist, he had long considered that the main problem was to apply the Constitution decreed by King Tupou I as it should be, and not to overhaul it. He added that a democratic system built on a foreign model would result in dissension: ‘My concern is that if Tonga becomes a democratic society, only the wealthy people will be able to get into Parliament and not necessarily the men of principle.’ In the end, Laki Niu ran against the ‘Pro-Democracy’ candidates in the 1993 legislative elections.

*Kēle‘a*, the most radical opposition paper, was not the only publication that took a stand in favour of the democratic claims. *Matangi Tonga*, a highly professional magazine, clearly indicated its leanings, but in far more circumspect terms. Here are few of its editorial comments. In September 1989, the editorial ended on the following note: ‘There is no doubt we need a Parliament, where good virtue prevails, which has the power to rule, a Parliament of the people, for the people and by the people.’ In January 1991, the editorialist wrote: ‘Tyranny by the Tongan government is becoming a major obstruction to the administration of justice and the making of laws in this country.’

**The debate on Tongan identity**

The passport affair

At first glance, the opposition’s exigencies can be read as classic demands for the democratisation of the political system, advanced primarily by the up-and-coming middle classes. On the whole, this opposition claims to be peaceful, even seeking, it says, to avoid the explosion that is inevitable if the government refuses to move on reform. To be sure this aspect clearly exists. Yet we feel it is essential to look behind this public debate and see another, hidden, debate which concerns this time the identity of the Tongan people.

From this standpoint, it is important to note that the most successful opposition campaign, the one which provoked the greatest repercussions and had the most decisive impact, was their objection to the sale of passports, which clearly posed the question of national identity. In 1982, the Tongan government decided to raise revenues by selling passports to people in a precarious situation, such for example as the Chinese of Hong Kong or Imelda Marcos. The sale of these various categories of passport — hence at different prices — brought in millions of dollars. Yet it is impossible to ascertain exactly how much they earned because, instead of being included in the State budget, these millions were deposited in a US bank and are supposed to be used as needed for Tonga’s ‘development budget’.
In an interview with a New Zealand television channel, the King justified this practice by his fear of seeing these very special revenues eaten up by salary rises for government employees. This cannot fail to surprise, given that no important decision concerning the government can be taken without the King's approval.

The sale of passports was felt, by the bulk of the population, to be scandalous and unworthy. As Papiloa Foaki, a well-known businesswoman and former People's Representative expressed it: ‘It is an arrow in the heart of people.’ The sales triggered very strong reactions, essentially for two reasons. The first has to do with the fact that this income was actually controlled by the King himself, it was kept secret and was therefore impossible to monitor. It was even said that it was the royal family’s pocket money. The second, and by far the most important, is that people felt it was the very identity of the Tongan people that had been sold.

It is the fear of losing this identity that is essential here, and it is stated explicitly. For instance, people are frightened by foreigners who want to settle permanently in Tonga. One reader writing to the Times of Tonga in April 1991 expressed a typical reaction, saying that the sale of passports makes them look like madmen, giving whoever has enough money carte blanche to their country, with the possibility to control the nation and throw them out. In the same newspaper, Futa Helu, the director of Atenisi, the institution mentioned above, had written a few months earlier that at no time would Tongans be servants of these foreigners as is the case for a great number of Fijians, who now work for the Indians. The influential magazine, Matangi Tonga, whose professionalism and moderation we have already cited, expressed concern about these sales as early as 1987, voicing the opinion that the question of national identity had become akin to putting a ‘made in Tonga’ label on an export or ‘transformed in Tonga’ on an item for re-export. In the January–February 1991 issue, the magazine returns to this subject in its editorial, ‘Tonga has sold its soul’: ‘Citizenship is something that Tongans were brought up to consider as a birthright and something to be proud of. It is not something you buy … Tongan citizenship as a commercial product is hard to come to terms with …’ The editorial sums up general opinion if one judges by the number of signatures on three petitions or by the size of the demonstration, organised on 8 March 1991, against such passport sales. Some two thousand people, a very large number considering Tonga's very small population, fell in behind the leaders of the political opposition as well as those of the two principal Churches of the country, the official Methodist Church and the Catholic Church. The government was obliged to acknowledge the sale of passports to be unlawful. In effect, just before the beginning of the proceedings instituted by one of the opposition leaders, the government was forced to convene the Parliament in an emergency session, something extremely rare in Tonga's history, which reports only two such sessions, both in very specific contexts. This time the purpose was to modify the Constitution and to regularise the naturalisation of several hundreds of people.

Identity and democracy
In the present case, it was the partisans of change who most clearly expressed their attachment to Tongan identity. Yet this sentiment is often accompanied by fairly clear
elements of xenophobia, notably on the part of the most active People’s Representatives in Parliament or on the staff of Kele’a, which ran the headline in its June 1992 issue: ‘The Chinese and the Indians are going to outnumber us; call a halt before it’s too late’. Among the most influential avowed supporters of democracy are some who go a step further and explicitly defend certain aspects of tradition precisely because these seem to them to be a part of Tongan identity. This is the case, for instance, of Epeli Hau’ofa, a sociology professor at the University of the South Pacific in Suva (Fiji) and a writer known in particular for a collection of humorous short stories about Tonga and economic development. In one of his political exposés, after having given the reasons he felt underlay the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of democratic aspirations in spite of absolute monarchy, E. Hau’ofa went on to say that, in his view, the nobles should be maintained in their function as reminders of the past and symbols of Tongan identity: ‘In saying what I have said, I did not wish to write the aristocracy off, far from it … They are the foci of our culture and identity as single people, as well as being the signposts of our historical continuity as a nation.’

Another example: Futu Helu, a particularly listened-to intellectual and fierce partisan of democracy, is also one of the best connoisseurs of Tongan tradition, which he teaches. Significantly, F. Helu always wears the tupenu, the traditional wrap-around, never trousers. On a somewhat different note, Anna Taufe’ulungaki, deputy director of Education and doctor of linguistics from the University of Birmingham, declared:

We are in grave danger of losing our identity as Tongans. We have been too preoccupied with Western values and priorities. Money is all. Many chiefs don’t recognise their full responsibilities to their own people. Even the language is at risk. There are certain values and ideas that are uniquely Tongan and can only be expressed in the Tongan language. Lose that and what are we? Cultural loss-makers like the Welsh.

Several times she comes back vehemently to the importance of the Tongan language for the preservation of Tongan culture. Like the Matangi Tonga editorialist, she speaks of Tongan identity as the ‘soul of a nation’. It was also an elected representative of the people, V. Fukofuka, one of the founding members of Kele’a, who sponsored a bill stipulating that the Tongan language must be the basic language used between government employees … and that knowledge of the Tongan language must be a prerequisite for employment by the government.

Obviously other partisans of democracy do not share these positions and do not defend traditional values. We can read, for example, in the Matangi Tonga editorial for March–April 1991, that tradition must not be allowed to hobble innovation, even if the culture is rooted in the past, that one must embrace the future and not be afraid of bilingualism, even if the rejected pieces of tradition end up in museums and history manuals. Some even make direct attacks on this tradition, usually in the name of Christian values and democracy. One such attack was launched in public, in 1974, at a seminar held under the auspices of the Tonga Council of Churches. Several participants had expressed sometimes very severe criticisms, based on Biblical references, of the land-holding system, which is extremely favourable to the nobles. In its closing resolution, the seminar declared: In the Bible, obligations went from
the rich to the poor, from the person who had land to the person who did not own any, from
the powerful to the powerless. Most obligations in our Tongan community go in the
opposite direction.35

Among the most active critics of tradition is the Catholic Bishop of Tonga, Monsignor
Finau, who died in October 1993 at the early age of 59. He aimed vigorous criticism at
corruption in State offices and in the ranks of Parliament; he was also an active defender of
democracy in the name of the Gospel. For instance, in October 1989, apropos of the
spectacular parlementarians’ walkout by the People's Representatives, he declared:36 ‘The
historic walkout of September 1989 is a prophetic call for changes in Tonga's Constitution …’
In January 1991, the Bishop pronounced the present political system ‘simply ridiculous’.
Furthermore, he was persuaded that, if the people of Tonga were invited to choose between
traditional values and Christian values, they would choose the first, which explains his
running battle against many aspects of traditional culture. He added that there ‘there is a
huge discrepancy between our culture and the teachings of Christ’. On many other occasions
and concerning a variety of practices, the Bishop spoke out clearly against tradition,
explaining that these were no longer Old Testament times but those of the New Testament.
In his February 1989 editorial for the Catholic monthly Taumu’a Lelei, the Bishop
challenged the ‘Tongan Way’ (faka Tonga) which consists in spending considerable sums of
money on visits by Church leaders or important people. In March 1989, at a tourism
convention, the Bishop once more declared in substance: when we are in fear of losing our
identity as Tongans, we must answer a few questions: Are we afraid of losing our privileged
position? Are we afraid of our moral decline? Perhaps we are afraid of justice? Perhaps it is the
fear of becoming slaves to the dollar? It could also be the fear of seeing our own people truly
develop.37 In his last editorial for Taumu’a Lelei, published shortly after his death, he asked
once more: ‘Are we for Christ or for our own culture?’ The Bishop’s behaviour was so
irritating to some that the King ventured to call him a ‘Marxist’, producing considerable
shockwaves felt well beyond Catholic circles. The Crown Prince, on the other hand, had
called him a ‘representative of a foreign power’, namely, the Vatican.

Another example of violent political criticism in the name of Christian values came
from a Tongan Methodist theologian living in Australia who, at the Convention on the
Tongan Constitution and Democracy, mentioned above, declared: ‘The Constitution does
not satisfy the philosophical, ethical, or theological standards appropriate to a society which
could, in the fullest sense, describe itself as Christian.’ By the same token, it is important to
note that the highly respected Reverend ’Amanaki Havea, then president of the official
Methodist Church, the King’s Church, declared in 1990 that he believed in the separation of
State and Church as institutions which are independent of each other but which can be one
in God. This rings much like an abandonment of the King by his own Church, if one
remembers that, in the modern history of Tonga, Church and State have been very closely
intertwined,38 and that most of the incidents in the history of the Churches of Tonga can be
read in a political light. Reverend ’Amenaki Havea played a considerable role in what
concerns us here. He was head of the Pacific Theological College in Suva (Fiji), a multi-
denominational Protestant institution which developed a doctrine relatively close to
Catholic liberation theology.39 Lastly, the first president of the ‘Pro-Democracy’ movement
was a Catholic priest, and the vice president, a pastor of the official Methodist Church. These were not just any priest or any pastor, since each was the editor of his own Church’s monthly.

The passport affair is not the only place where the identity debate appears. It can be seen in other areas as well. The partisans of the system in place, the royalists, defend the institutional status quo in the name of tradition. They might be thought to be acting out of self-interest, since those royalists taking part in the public debate have every interest in maintaining the status quo which means the preservation of their often considerable privileges. Even if this were true though, it does not explain everything involved in the choice of an argumentation based on tradition. There are other arguments as well: since the end of the civil war at the close of the nineteenth century, rulers have been engaged in building a genuine State which managed to preserve — Tonga is the unique case in the South Pacific — a minimum of national integrity during the colonial era;40 the present king has worked determinedly for the country’s economic development and, if one compares with the neighbouring countries, for example Western Samoa, Tonga comes out well; the royal family has afforded Tonga a long period of stability, and so on.

Of course these arguments are sometimes used by the royalists, but more often their rhetoric is grounded on tradition, proving that, in their view, arguments based on this tradition are not only the most legitimate, they are also the most effective. Incidences of this tradition-based anti-democratic argumentation are countless. We will mention in particular the government’s rebroadcast, on the eve of the 1993 elections, of a speech by the late Queen Salote Tupou II, the much-revered mother of the present king, urging respect for tradition. Briefly the argument goes that the status quo should be maintained in the name the traditional identity of the Tongan people and of national unity, everything else being regarded as bad because it is alien to the tradition of the country. As an example, we will cite a comment made by the noble Fusitu’a concerning one fono:41 ‘There are new alien elements which seek to separate the people from the chiefs and from the legislative assembly, despite the fact that they form a single body’; it should be understood that, by alien, he means Tongans educated abroad to progressive ideas. Likewise, in a speech before the Parliament, the Finance Minister declared that political parties create dissension. Fortunately, he added, Tongans usually return from abroad without this contagious political virus that comes from the West, one of the signs — indicating that some have nonetheless been contaminated — being the wearing of trousers in place of the traditional tupenu.

The idea that democracy creates dissension while tradition maintains social cohesion crops up frequently in royalist speeches. Here is yet another example. In 1992, the noble Fusitu’a, appointed ‘Speaker of the House’ by the King, declared in front of the overseas conference of the League for Freedom and Democracy (formerly an international anti-communist movement), that freedom was more important than democracy and that Lincoln’s definition of democracy was outdated, and he went on to say that the existence of political parties led to the domination of the weak by the strong.42 Another noble, Malupo, defended the status quo in the name of maintaining the ‘traditional values of respect, love and peaceableness’. He added: ‘We are still at peace only because we still ask things of each other.’
However it is the King himself who expresses the clearest opinion on the subject. In an interview granted in January 1990, he rejected the idea of a democratic government because, he said, it would allow communism, or a dictatorship, to seize power in Tonga. Above all he stresses that the objective of Tonga’s government is to work with all Tongans, without opposition, that the kind of government provided for by the Constitution is government by consensus, and finally that ‘the guardian of popular leadership is the King not the Parliament’. The logical outcome of all this is that, for some royalists, a political party would be envisageable and legitimate only if it were powerful enough to rally a very large majority of the population favourable to the royal family. This explains at least in part the attempt to put together a political party (which was to be termed ‘Christian democrat’), on the eve of the February 1993 legislative elections, when the government convened the eleven principal religious denominations in Tonga. Needless to add, the government met with a polite refusal from most of the Churches, which considered the government proposition manipulative and ill-timed.

Democracy and development

Since we have said that there are democrats who are also traditionalists — and conversely — we are now going to show that being a democrat does not necessarily mean being in favour of rapid economic development, and vice versa. This is particularly clear in the case of the King. Since he mounted the throne over twenty-five years ago, the King has done everything in his power to implement a dynamic policy of economic development (including encouraging emigration to ease demographic pressure). In reality, progressist royalists are busily sawing at the branch on which they are sitting.

They are caught up in a basic contradiction: the King wants both progress and tradition. I. Campbell taxed the King with having brought with him to the throne the seeds of political instability insofar as he was a modernising radical. When the King attempts, at all costs, to ensure development by opening-up the country, favouring emigration, developing education and tourism, inviting foreign capital and international aid, liberalising the economy, etc., he is contributing to the dismantling of tradition. It must be added that several members of the royal family, beginning with the King himself, are setting the example. They involve themselves, sometimes ostentatiously, in business ventures, but in so doing, they undermine their traditional royal status. By going into business, they are behaving like everyone else, like the common people, even if they gain economic power. Papiloa Foliaki, the businesswoman mentioned above, expresses a widely held opinion when she says: ‘Commercialism and tradition are now in conflict, even in the monarchy itself. In commerce everyone is the same. Ordinary people are saying, ‘If the monarchy is doing what we are doing, what are we to do? What is behind our royalty any more?’

Other royalists, on the contrary, even among those most favourable to evolution of the political system, are worried to see Tongans turning into clones of Western civilization. This is the case of Langi Hu’akavameiliku, who holds several ministerial portfolios, among which that of Deputy Prime Minister, and who, on the one hand, some time ago submitted several projects to the King for constitutional reform and, on the other hand, declared at the thirty-first South
Pacific Conference held in Tonga: ‘Even among ourselves, we don’t know whether we are equal or Pacific people or clones of the facade of Western society.’ In October 1993, Langi Hu’akavameiliku came back to the subject in an interview given to *Matangi Tonga*, replying that it was crucial for Tonga to think about what kind of development is achievable, which could be undertaken according to Tonga’s own criteria, and not a Western-style development; but he added: ‘I want to be a modern man and a Tongan, not a modern man who happens to live in Tonga … we hope that whatever we do, we will still maintain our Tongan identity, our government and the Monarchy.’

In the opposition camp, it is highly significant that the leader, ’Akilisi Pohiva, is for slow-paced economic development. For him, rapid economic development supposes calling on foreigners who would then come to dominate and destroy Tongan society. It is therefore necessary to envisage slowing down the economic-development program and not trying to do like everyone else. The appeal to nationalism is even clearer when he adds: ‘What should be done now is to make the Tongan people angry, tell them something like, that the Indians are going to come and destroy them, something that will make them sit up and be proud of themselves.’ True, Pohiva can evoke one of the most famous phrases of King Tūpou I, spoken at the proclamation of the Constitution on 4 November 1875; ‘Tonga ma’a Tonga’, which is usually construed as ‘Tonga for the Tongans’, carrying national overtones, whereas, strictly speaking, it could also be understood as ‘all Tongans for Tonga’. To put it another way, here Pohiva is appealing to an old-style, somewhat prickly nationalism. As can be seen, one can be a staunch supporter of democracy and at the same time be wary of economic development, once again in the name of Tonga and the identity of the Tongan people.

**Conclusion**

We have tried to show that, in the context of the growing invasion of a small third-world country by Western values, one cannot be content to analyse political battles in terms of political sociology alone. Behind these very real and sometimes bitter political struggles, over defence or undoing privileges and which are by no means to be denied, lies a highly charged issue of identity. The stakes are all the more vital because a small country like Tonga has extremely limited resources, whatever the area considered. To take only one example: can a written literature be produced today in the Tongan language by such a small population completely encircled by an Anglo-Saxon material and moral culture? And in fact this literature is practically non-existent.

In our countries, it is becoming fashionable to complain about the loss of identity signposts and to laugh it off. The question of identity nonetheless exists, and it is the source of many difficulties. We should not be surprised then that the issue of identity, as we have attempted to describe it in contemporary Tonga through the ongoing political battles, appears fragmented and sometimes vague. Indeed has identity, wherever it may be, ever been something totally homogeneous, stable and non-contradictory? One has only to recall here something Lévi-Strauss said in his seminar on identity: ‘[Societies] split [identity] into a multitude of components the synthesis of which, for each culture, though in different terms, poses a problem.’ Wherever it may be, major periods of transition often produce
constellations, even variegated patchworks, composed of old and new, and one of these constellations ultimately prevails when one period has finally given way to another.

Footnotes
1 This text was written in 1995. Since then, there have been new events and some changes in the actors. Nevertheless, the relationship we have tried to present between identity, tradition and democracy remains for the most part unchanged.
2 Tonga is an archipelago in the southern hemisphere, situated between 15° and 23° lat. s. and 173° and 175° long. w., not far from Fiji and Samoa. It is comprised of 170 islands, 36 of which are inhabited by a total of some 100,000 persons.
3 See Marcus (1977).
5 The issue of Tongan identity also involves nationalism (sometimes xenophobia) and tradition, but the two are so often intertwined in the argumentation that it is hard to sort them out, for, as we have already said, we are not dealing with a tradition but with a neo-tradition which exhibits a nationalistic aspect.
6 Quoted in Latukefu (1975: 41).
7 In fact, the Constitution contradicts itself on this point since there are areas in which the principle of equality before the law — between nobles and commoners — is not recognised.
8 The Parliament is a legislative body comprised of the twelve ministers and governors, all appointed by the king and accountable to him only, of twelve nobles elected by the thirty nobles of the realm and of nine representatives elected by the people. On important questions, the ministers and nobles almost always vote as a bloc.
9 As everywhere, women would not gain this right until much later, in 1951, through a constitutional amendment (Act n° 15, 1951).
10 As an example of development of the entrepreneurial spirit, we can cite the widespread fascination with the cash-cropping of pumpkins for Japan. Production rose from 1,088 tons in 1988 to some 18,000 tons in 1993 (see Grijp, n.d.).
11 The first school was set up in 1829 by missionaries. Primary education was made compulsory in 1846, and since 1974 the age for leaving school has been raised to 14.
12 Quoted in Latukefu (1974: 75).
13 Both establishments are named 'Atenisii, the Tongan form of the word 'Athens'.
14 A. Taufe-ulugaki, the deputy director of Education points out that the use of English is also an equaliser, enabling people to circumvent the special vocabulary used with nobles. Thus MPs often speak in English during pauses in a parliamentary session.
15 Tonga's population in 1921 was 23,759, and in 1986 it was 95,649.
17 See Benguigui (1989). In passing, it should be noted that, contrary to the previsions of the Constitution, the number of men over the age of 16 not having been allotted land is considerable and on the rise.
18 Kava, made from the root of a pepper plant (Piper methysticum), is the traditional drink reserved for men in Polynesia. It is drunk on ceremonial occasions. Both its preparation and its consumption are the object of a rigorous codification accompanied by an order of precedence. It is also consumed informally, notably in cafes commonly called 'kava clubs'.
19 There is only one radio station in Tonga and it is State owned.
20 This teacher would later have the Tongan government condemned for unfair dismissal (verdict rendered in May 1988).
21 It seems that Keleia, an often pamphleteering newsletter, is now deeply in debt following a series of lost libel cases. The magazine Islands Business Pacific, in its February 1994 issue, mentions debts amounting to US $ 44,000.
22 In *Matangi Tonga*, March 1990. *Matangi Tonga* is the only genuine magazine in Tonga. Launched in November 1986, shortly after *Kele'a*, it is trimestrial.

23 To understand this remark, one must recall the importance attributed by both tradition and the law, to respect for nobles. For instance, there is a law, not applied today but not abrogated either, which stipulates: 'It shall be unlawful to pass any of the nobles on horseback or in any vehicle without stopping until the noble has passed and saluting by raising the hand' (*Town Regulation Act*, section 13).


25 An example of his royalist stand, even before his break with the opposition: 'it is unlawful in law to criticise the king or to judge him, and I firmly support this' (*Times of Tonga*, 11 April 1911).

26 Laki Niu was publically accused of corruption by the leader of the opposition, A. Pohiva (pers. com. from A. Pohiva, August 1993).

27 Among the very important campaigns waged by the *Kele'a* group, we can cite those against the astonishing stipends MPs award themselves or those against tax reform.

28 In the past few years, these prices could be as high as US$50,000.


30 This fear of foreigners has a long history. Article 3 of the 1875 Constitution forbid the importing of Chinese labour. The article was modified in 1912, extending the ban to all Asian workers, with very few exceptions.

31 The first was in 1915, during the First World War, the second, in 1982, after hurricane Isaac.


34 See Bain (1993: 116).


36 Most People's Representatives had walked out of the Parliament for 2 weeks in protest against the disdain they felt the government and the nobles showed them.

37 In the May 1989 issue of *Matangi Tonga*.

38 S. Latukefu's book, *Church and State in Tonga*, sheds particular light on the subject (Latukefu 1974). Note that in the arms of Tonga, the two olive branches represent the union of Church and State, as does the motto: 'God and Tonga are my inheritance.'

39 Nevertheless, the official Methodist Church is divided over the positions taken by Reverend Havea. For instance, at the Church's last annual assembly, in 1993, the delegates from the outlying islands moved against the political articles published in the Church monthly.

40 Tonga is the only State in the South Pacific never to have been directly colonised, it was merely declared a protectorate from 1900 to 1970.

41 The Tongan *fono* is a meeting convened by the person in authority in view of expressing his wishes. It is different from the Samoan *fono* which usually permits an exchange of views.

42 This noble declared to the Tongan News Association in 1991 that freedom of the press did not exist anywhere in the world, not in Tonga, in the United States or Australia or New Zealand … and that media owners had their own means of censoring news that might not be good for them.

43 This government attempt was paradoxical insofar as, on several occasions, different ministers had complained about the Churches’ meddling in politics.


47 Quoted by K. James in the newspaper *Contemporary Pacific* (see James 1993). It should also be noted that the Education Ministry has left Tonga's school system in a deplorable state for many years.

48 See too the editorial in the April 1994 issue of *Matangi Tonga*. 'Democracy yes; free enterprise, yes; but at the same time we should not allow the process of change to alienate Tongans in their own country.'

49 In the March 1990 issue of *Matangi Tonga*.

50 See Lévi-Strauss (ed. 1977: 11).