

# Health and healing in contemporary Tonga

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## Introduction

The most striking feature of the health care system in Tonga at the end of this century is its pluralistic flavor. It includes more than one medical ideology and more than one system of services so that an individual has a choice of receiving care from a traditional Tongan healer (*faito'o faka Tonga*) who prescribes herbal cures, sets bones, and uses therapeutic massage, or from a physician or registered nurse in the hospital or clinic who has been trained in the biomedical tradition. The availability of multiple options places Tonga with the majority of societies around the world that accommodate the coexistence of differing health care traditions. Medical pluralism has become the rule, not the exception.<sup>1</sup> This paper is about the contemporary health care system that has its roots in early Tongan history.

## Early Tonga

The current flexible approach to healing has a long history. Eighteenth and 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries and explorers sailing around the South Pacific wrote about the skill of Tongans in performing operations, such as removing an arrow point lodged in a man's lung, and in setting broken bones.<sup>2</sup> They mentioned the assortment of herbs used for curing, and experienced first-hand, the therapeutic uses of massage. Among other islanders, Fijians were thought to be the best surgeons because they had so much experience with injuries resulting from warfare, but Tongans had a reputation as being particularly knowledgeable about herbs and internal remedies.<sup>3</sup> The role of the supernatural in causing illness and misfortune was also evident.<sup>4 5. 6. 7</sup> In

order for cure to be successful in cases of possession, the god or spirit of a deceased ancestor who was causing the trouble had to be appeased. This was done with sacrifice and invocation.

The medical paradigm accommodated both supernatural and secular illness. Spirit-caused illnesses belonged to the priests and ritual specialists who intervened with the gods and spirits of dead relatives on behalf of the patient. The responsibility for treating "ordinary" illness rested with ordinary people whose skills were perfected as new therapies were continually being tested and added. Reliable information is not available to indicate how individuals decided which system was used with which ailment.

## The introduction of biomedicine

The more recent history of biomedicine is intimately tied to the history of Christianity in Tonga. Missionaries quickly learned that villagers who would not attend church for a sermon, traveled great distances for medicines, and the dispensary was soon part of the mission structure.<sup>8</sup> There are a number of reasons to explain why conversion was so rapid and so complete, but an important consideration is that the structure of the church was able to overlay the social structure in place, with Christian priests and ministers stepping in for Tongan priests and chiefs.<sup>9,10</sup> In a similar way, the existing local medical paradigm accommodated biomedicine, and these were added to the options already being used to treat ordinary illnesses. There was no need for a rejection of old methods in order to adopt new treatments because the traditional approach to illness was pluralistic already. During this time in Tonga's history, it is unlikely that missionary medicine, which reflected popular European treatments of the time, such as blood letting, lancing, and purging, were anymore effective than those already in place in Tonga, but they did offer an alternative.<sup>11</sup>

It is significant that the present king, not foreigners, is credited with the modern biomedical health care system present throughout the country. Decades ago King Taufauhau IV encouraged the brightest students to study medicine and nursing overseas with the result that today very few of the more than 40 physicians and over 200 nurses are non-Tongans. He also set himself up as a role model for his people by allowing photographs to be taken of him on his exercise bicycle, and by releasing the results of his medical examinations conducted in New Zealand. Addition-

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ally, it is commonly known that there are a number of resident healers in the palace to meet his and his family's other needs. This image of the King working to improve his health while consulting healers captures the un-self-conscious manner that medical pluralism is experienced by contemporary Tongans.

## Contemporary illness, knowledge and practice

Situations where individuals have multiple, equally accessible options available to them to treat illness beg the question of how they choose between them. This is one of the topics I studied while living in Tonga in 1990 with my family, and during a later visit in 1993.<sup>12</sup> Health in Tonga is not simply the absence of disease, but includes having a good life, of being lucky or fortunate, of being satisfied that you are fulfilling duties to God, country and family. Health includes all of these feelings, and illness strikes when any one is out of balance.

The concepts of *mana* and *tapu* are also central to an understanding of health.

Breaking a *tapu* is an action that disrupts balance and leaves one open to bad luck, or retribution by spirits. Having *mana* offers some protection against misfortune, and it is the force that allows a healer to act as a vessel for the healing power of God.

Facing serious illness and the threat of death is a profound experience and one that puts spiritual and philosophical beliefs to the test. In early Tonga the gods, ancestors, and nameless spirits were called upon to help. During the last century the cosmic order has changed, and a new force has come to dominant the spiritual realm. Belief in a Christian god and western biomedicine are new additions to this landscape.

Today, just as in the past, some conditions are caused by breaking a *tapu* and treatment involves the supernatural. While traditional priests are no longer available and interventions have changed to eliminate human sacrifice in favor of other ritual processes, every community has a healer who still knows what to do, a *faito'o faka tevolo*. The treatment must not only cure the symptoms, but deal with the cause of the trouble by first identifying the offended spirit, and then by righting the wrong. Prayers to God are often added to the therapy.

More commonly used today than *faito'o faka tevolo*, perhaps, are *faito'o faka Tonga*. There are estimates that on the main island with its population of 65,000, there are over 200 healers. These men and women practice, figuratively, alongside biomedical practitioners to cure "ordinary" ill-

nesses, which are often described by the phrase, *puke pe*, "just sick."

By spending time in hospitals and clinics, and with healers in villages and towns, I learned of the ways people talk about and classify illnesses. There is a distinction between conditions thought to be introduced by Europeans, or at least best treated with western therapies, *mahaki faka Palagi*, European sickness, and those that are *mahaki faka Tonga*, Tongan sickness<sup>13</sup>. Another distinction, and the terms I observed to be used most frequently, are between *puke pe* and *puke faka tevolo* (spirit-caused illness).

There are certain conditions that are clearly spirit-caused, and going to a doctor will do little good, just as there are a number of conditions that can only be treated in the hospital. However, even in these situations, if the primary therapy is not progressing, there is some room for flexibility

by adding alternative treatments as adjuncts. There is also movement between systems (going to see a healer or a physician) with conditions described as *puke pe*. This category is used with a wide variety of

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conditions that are self-limiting or seem to respond to treatment. It is not so much the severity of the condition that puts someone in that category since a person who is *puke pe* may be suffering from either a minor ailment, like *kahi*, a stomach complaint, or be near death, such as with uncontrolled diabetes, *suka lahi*. What they have in common is that there is little mystery as to the eventual outcome.

Disease categorization is of interest, but does not necessarily dictate treatment. There are a number of options available to a person who is sick, and illness is usually accompanied by much discussion (though often with little consensus) regarding the best course of action. The result is that diagnosis is most frequently made retrospectively — what treatment worked defines the condition. Decisions about where to go for care, then are based primarily on pragmatic factors. Even though the ideologies of biomedicine and traditional healing are very different, for the individual suffering, relief of symptoms is the main concern. Whatever means are most easily accessible are the ones to be used. For example, if a person has a problem and wants advice (or needs treatment) but also must go to town on an errand, she is most likely to stop by the hospital and see the doctor because it is on the bus route to her destination. If the outcome is satisfactory, that is the end of that. However, if she continues to have problems, she may well try a healer within a few days. If someone experiences a condition similar to that of a relative or neighbor, he may ask that person's advice, and if a particular mixture of leaves and bark (*faito'o*) was effective, then that is what he will try first.

If a therapy is successful, then there is little discussion about what was behind the problem. If, however, the intervention does not work, or the symptoms change to indicate another class of illness, then the search for answers begins. This was the case with a middle-aged man who developed severe back pain one day after working in his garden. His family told me how he first tried massage, *foto foto*, and when that did not help his pain, he went to the hospital. Multiple tests were done with inconclusive results. Back home, he continued to see a number of healers, none of whom were able to decrease his pain, nor stop his progressive immobility. Over the course of three years, he was seen by every physician on the island, and visited approximately 40 healers, and still his symptoms worsened. There were heated debates between the man's sister and his wife over what was causing his mysterious symptoms, and what treatments should be pursued. After he died, he visited a niece in a dream and told her that his illness was punishment for disturbing a grave in his garden on that fateful day. It seems a Tongan chief from the past was buried there, and the man had inadvertently dug up the bones. It was not intentional because he was unaware of the location of the grave, but his mistake was not taking responsibility for his actions. The family felt that if he had asked forgiveness from the descendants of the chief, the outcome would have been different. His death is explained as from *te'ia*, a serious condition caused by spirits.

Ordinary ailments may also be re-defined as spirit caused. Occasionally a simple boil will not heal after using the usual treatments. Boils are very common, and the herbal poultices are usually effective, so when cure does not occur, questions arise as to what is making this situation different. Belief in spirits varies within the population. Some people find them to be the cause for most illness, while others find these beliefs to be a remnant from the past.

Attitudes toward healers also varies, although one would be hard pressed to find a person who has not benefited from a herbal mixture prepared by a mother or aunt, or felt the curative power of skillful massage administered with scented coconut oil. Just as those who treat spirit possession may on occasion invoke God's help, *faito'o faka Tonga* continually add to their pharmacopoeia by trying new plants, and sometimes supplementing infusions with crushed anti-inflammatory drugs.

## Conclusion

In summary, the strength of the Tongan health care system today is its flexible approach to medicine and healing. A very visible modern system based on concepts of biomedicine is present with an equally viable traditional system that uses a variety of time-honored treatments. This is at a time when other countries around the world are recognizing the limitations of biomedicine, and are trying to re-introduce alternative methods into their health care

delivery systems. The ability of Tonga to accommodate new beneficial technologies while not dismissing the utility of older relevant methods, leave it is poised to enter the next century on firm foundation.

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