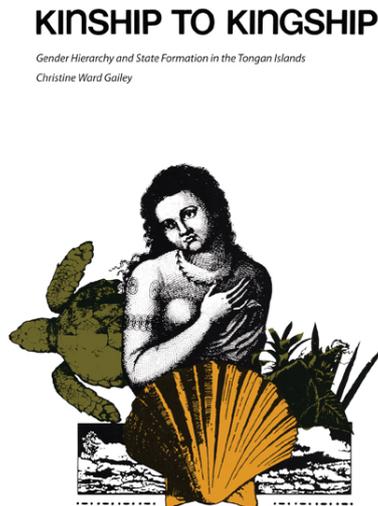


Review: Christine Ward Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship - Gender Hierarchy and State formation in the Tongan Islands*

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The origin of women's oppression

With a new feminist movement sweeping the world, debates around women's oppression, inequality and sexuality are once again topical on the left and beyond. Socialists have always played a key role in the women's movement both in theory and in practice. The contributions of women like Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin have been invaluable to the feminist movement as well as the socialist movement. Once again the contribution of socialists in the new movement is of utmost importance, both because our strategy and tactics can push the movement forward but also be-

cause a socialist understanding of the relationship between class society and sexism can contribute to the total elimination of women's oppression. It is precisely this connection between the rise of class society and the oppression of women, as set out by Karl Marx's collaborator Frederick Engels in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, which has been at the heart of socialists' understanding of gender inequality since the very beginning of the socialist movement. Engels argued that the rise of class society changed the position of women in society to a subordinate one, in what he called 'the world historical defeat of the female sex'.¹

This book by Christine Ward Gailey, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, is extremely useful in giving socialists a factual example of the link between gender hierarchy and class society. On the other hand, it is quite academic and difficult to read if you have no former knowledge of anthropology or the Marxist understanding of women's oppression.

Class society and women's oppression

Engels argues in *The Origin of the Family* that the formation of the state and the family were a consequence of the division in society into classes. As human beings developed from roaming hunter gatherers to settled groups involved in agriculture, we began producing more than we needed to sustain ourselves. This surplus grad-

¹F. Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 120

ually fell into the control of a minority of people, leading to the division in society of a majority group of producers and a minority of non-producers. In order to maintain this division a system of exclusive violence and control by the minority emerged i.e. the state. In conjunction with this, the family emerged as a social unit. There were several contributing circumstances leading to the development of gender hierarchy, the most important being the role of private property and heredity rights. As soon as a surplus controlled by a minority emerged, it became necessary to maintain that surplus within a family through generations. The only way to guarantee this was to control women's sexuality. Other contributing factors to the development of gender hierarchy were the need for a growing population for agricultural labour, combined with the physical nature of that labour, for example the use of heavy ploughs, which made it difficult for pregnant and breastfeeding women to perform. The combination of these factors led to the oppression of women primarily through the control of women's sexuality.

Anthropological studies

One of the most difficult aspects of establishing proof for Engels's theory is the lack of indications of social organisation in pre class human societies in archaeological findings. Generally, the best information we can get, and which Christine Ward Gailey uses in relation to Tonga, is written accounts of still or recently remaining pre-class societies. However, many of these would have been written by European travellers or missionaries and these accounts can be very problematic in that their authors were influenced by the moral-

ity of their own society and the project of colonisation. As Gailey says: 'Typically, the peoples encountered in voyages of discovery are at first presented as radically different but civilized people; only when colonial settlement, mercantile expansion, or ideological conversion becomes the focus of attention do the images shift to those of savages.'²

In addition, those written much later about more recently undiscovered hunter gatherer groups tend to be problematic in that many of these groups have been influenced in some way by the capitalist, or class stratified, society which surrounds them. For example, Eleanor Burke Leacock notices in the Naskapi people in Canada that the men hunt for furs to sell on a capitalist market which is likely to have influenced gender relations in their, otherwise hunter gatherer, society.

Despite all these difficulties, the evidence we have tends to confirm Engels's theory of the connection between the formation of classes and the oppression of women.

Class stratification and state formation

Gailey takes the particular example of the islands of Tonga to study the relationship between class formation and gender hierarchy. In the 17th Century, when Europeans first arrived in Tonga, the people there lived as hunter gatherers in a kin based society. The kin groups were like large extended family groups with varying rights and responsibilities to the society (or community) as a whole. Some of these kin groups were higher ranking than others. Gailey sees 'state formation as a *process*'³ and explains that at the time of

²Christine Ward Gailey, *Kinship to Kingship - Gender Hierarchy and State formation in the Tongan Islands*, p.160

³As above p. 10

contact this process of class division and state formation had already begun, however it was accelerated over the subsequent period. This means that Tongan society was already beginning to move towards a society where the majority of people would produce while a minority of people control the products of their labour. This was taking place over a very long period of time. 'Among state formative dynamics explored in the Tongan case, there is a struggle over time between elite classes, or an emerging civil administration, and local kin or quasi-kin groups, notably over assertions of control over local labour, goods, and social continuity.'⁴

Certain aspects of the Tongan kin-based society operating before this process accelerated, can help us understand the origins of state, class and gender hierarchy and how they emerged. There was a system of 'rank' in Tonga before contact, however it was not as clear as in a fully class divided society. Gailey explains it the following way: 'All Tongans were ranked according to three inconsistent relations of superiority and inferiority. Older was superior to younger; maleness was superior to femaleness; sisterhood was superior to brotherhood.'⁵ These categories are clearly contradictory in our eyes; how can sisterhood be superior to brotherhood if maleness is superior to femaleness? This is why Gailey emphasizes the need to see this development as a fluid process whereby there is a mix of elements from a pre-class society, such as the authority of sisterhood, with the male superiority of a class society. She further explains that: '...in spite of a growing literature on the complexities of gender categories in kinship societies, writers persist in referring

to activities done by males and females, rather than men or women. Age, too, is misleading: life status is a better phrase, since chronology rarely is the primary focus. Passage through culturally identified critical experiences is more important than physical aging, since such transitions involve becoming more fully human.'⁶

Formally, the distinctions such as age and gender seem to match those that we would use to 'categorize' people under capitalism. This has led many mainstream anthropologists to argue that hierarchy is somehow 'natural' or 'biological' and has always existed. In contrast, we should understand that these categories are extremely complex and much more flexible than we realise. For example, the category of gender only applied at certain periods of a person's life, between puberty and when your children start having children:

The division of labour by gender and age in kinship societies sets up separate spheres of productive activity for women and men *during certain periods of their respective life cycles*. In most cases these periods are roughly congruent with the culturally determined ways of becoming a parent and rearing children. Often overlooked are those periods when the gender distinctions are inoperative or transcended.⁷

So what we see is that there was a division of labour in Tongan society, but that this division had not yet fully developed into classes or a strict gender hierarchy. There were hierarchical structures but '...chiefly and non-chiefly strata were

⁴As above p. 41

⁵As above p. 59

⁶As above p. 23

⁷As above p. 24

not isomorphic with non-producers and producers, and therefore did not constitute classes'⁸. For example, to become a chief you had to be born into a chiefly kin, but not necessarily be the son or daughter of a chief. It was also possible to marry into the chiefly kin, however it was becoming less common. In addition, the chiefs had some decision making power and administrative functions but they *could not deny* anyone land or subsistence resources. These examples indicate that elements of class formation and hierarchy existed alongside the old kin rights and responsibilities.

Due to this transitional phase that Tongan society was passing through, there were conflicts between the kin structures and the developing hierarchical structures and 'To effect subordination of community reproduction to that of the state-associated relations, there is an ongoing attempt of the emerging dominant classes to split the unity and autonomy of the local kin groups.' Basically, chiefly people would try to break down the old kin based obligations and responsibilities such as the chiefs responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of their non-chiefly kin. However, this often led to revolts 'against chiefs considered oppressive by their non-chiefly kin'. This was essentially because 'a chief who became oppressive was not acting as a chief'⁹

After European contact and the beginning of outside trade, the hierarchical divisions and the class formative tendencies that had slowly been developing, became highly accelerated by the need to produce goods for trade rather than for consumption. Previously, goods had primarily been produced for consumption, or items such

as carved whale bones or woven mats for use in ceremonies, but never for trade on a market. There were distinctions in what was deemed valuable, for example, goods produced by women such as mats and whale bones were always deemed 'valuable' while those produced by men (mainly foods and tools) were not. 'Valuables were always superior to the things made by men; men's objects and women's objects formed separate and unequal spheres.'¹⁰ However, because the items were deemed as 'valuable' does not mean that they were the product of alienated labour, because the producers remained in control of their own labour and the products of their labour. We are not talking about exchange value here, since there was no exchange taking place. 'Where the maker retains control over the production process - including the acquisition of raw materials, tools, and the making and distribution of goods- labour is not alienated. This was predominantly the case in precontact Tonga.'¹¹ The value of an item was also related to 'the importance of the occasions for which their presentation or consumption was suitable'¹² and for whom it was produced. For example '...a mat made by a tu'a woman at the request of a paramount female chief would have greater value than one made at the request of a lower-ranking chief.'¹³ In light of this Gailey argues that 'The partial association of value with the persons requesting production ... is symptomatic of increasing stratification. That is, value was at least somewhat disassociated from the producer, although it was not associated solely with the object itself.'¹⁴ Basically, the fact that a product is of higher value because

⁸As above p. 96

⁹As above p. 94

¹⁰As above p. 107

¹¹As above p. 117

¹²As above p. 122

¹³As above p. 122

¹⁴As above p. 122

of the relationship between it and a high ranking person shows us that Tongan society had begun the development of classes. As this development accelerated the chiefly people slowly ceased to be producers and became non-producers and expropriators, while the majority of people continued producing for themselves but also for trade and to support the chiefs:

In later times, Tongans making the items lost control over the disposition of their products. The goods were traded by an emerging landed gentry for the receipt of goods both to bolster their own position and to expand the production of trade items.¹⁵

The state then emerged in Tonga as a necessary tool to maintain these new class divisions, and keep control of the producing majority. By the late 19th Century a system of courts, legislation and police had been established.¹⁶ However, the state was still partially based on the old kin structures:

The emerging state society is reproduced partly through kin ordered production (including distribution and consumption patterns). But the reproduction of class relations depends upon non-kin institutions (such as military or religious structures) that ensure or orchestrate political control. Such domination is needed to generate, extract,

and distribute goods and services that support the non-producing class(es).

Even though the process of the formation of the state in Tonga had already begun at the time of first contact, in the period following it was highly accelerated due to the emergence of trade and the subsequent changes in productive forces. Gailey however notes that 'State formation as a process is not necessarily one-way, nor is it an inevitable outgrowth of, for instance, stratified kinship relations.'¹⁷ In other circumstances, for example if this process had taken place thousands of years ago without the element of contact with capitalism, it is possible that the emergence of hierarchical structures may have stretched over a very long period of time. This was not the case in Tonga, because once a system such as capitalism has emerged in one part of the world, there is no longer a need for a society to go through all the stages of development such as slavery and feudalism. Instead society can go from a pre-class kin-based structure to a fully capitalist society within a few hundred years. What the example of Tonga shows us is that classes and the state are not natural or eternal, but merely one stage in human history and one that we can move beyond.

Women in pre-contact Tonga

The position of women in pre-contact Tonga reflects the process of class formation as described above. There was not yet a gender hierarchy where women were subordinate to men, but there were some tensions between the areas where women had authority and where they didn't. For

¹⁵As above p. 157

¹⁶'By 1875, a system of courts and police had been established throughout the Islands. Missionary-merchant-state connections supplied all three groups with steady sources of revenue and labour' As above p. 199

¹⁷As above p. 40

example, the authority of the sister as compared to the subordination of the wife. That is not to say that the evidence of women's authority is not remarkable and extraordinary.

Rank, for example, was inherited from the mother: 'In every family nobility descends in the female line - where the mother is not noble, the children are not. All the children of a female noble ['eiki, high-ranking chiefly woman] are without exception, noble.'¹⁸

Domestic violence and rape existed, but were rare occurrences and had serious consequences, including capital punishment.¹⁹ Reflective of the relative gender equality, the Tongan gods were of either gender or androgynous, and the priesthood was available to both genders.

Relationships in Tonga were predominantly monogamous, however there were exceptions. Interestingly enough, 'the term for 'spouse', *oanna*, was not gender-distinguished: there were no terms for 'husband' or 'wife'.²⁰ Language tends to reflect society, and it would seem that the absence of a gender-distinguished term reflects the nature of the relationship. It is possible however, that the language here is more indicative of relationships in the times before the beginning of stratification. Either way, relationships were much more equal compared to those in Europe at the time. Both partners were expected to be faithful²¹, but the marriages were not for

life:

Both chiefly and nonchiefly people could divorce and remarry (Labilliardiere 1800:376), but divorce was at the discretion of the husband. However, Tongan wives were not locked into unhappy or brutal marriages until their husbands relented: "When a man divorces his wife, which is attended with no other ceremony than just telling her she may go, she becomes the perfect mistress of her own conduct, and may marry again, ... without the least disparagement to her character" (Mariner 1827:2:145).²²

The most important aspect of women's authority is the role of the Fahu - or the sisterhood. As sisters women could claim rights to the labour of their brother and his wife and they held authority in matters such as marriage. Gailey explains that 'A father's *sister* was never ignored. Tongan women - especially chiefly women- exercised social authority throughout life as sisters.'²³ Although this authority still existed at time of contact, there was a tension between 'the role of the sister and that of wife. Sisters had consistent authority; wives deferred to husbands.'²⁴ As the process of class formation accelerated in the post-contact period the role of the Fahu

¹⁸(Mariner 1827:2:89)

¹⁹'Most sources agree that Tongan women enjoyed high status relative to European women of the time, and were relatively immune from everyday violence. ... Periodic or chronic wife-abuse was exceedingly rare and, at least in some cases, resulted in capital punishment.' (*Kinship to Kingship* p. 143), 'Rape was known, but supposedly rare' (Mariner 1827:1:173), 'The priesthood also was available to both genders. Tutelary deities were of either gender and some were androgynous.' (p.101)

²⁰(Vason 1810:142)

²¹'Married women were expected to be faithful (Neill 1955:59). A married man who was unfaithful frequently faced serious consequences, including abandonment.' (p. 138)

²²*Kinship to Kingship* p. 141

²³As above p. 71

²⁴As above p. 74

tended to be diminished with the emphasis on ‘wifely and motherly roles at the expense of the sister role.’²⁵ Alongside this there was the increasing use of arranged marriages to consolidate rank among the chiefly families.²⁶ In conjunction with the rise of a state and classes in the following period, we can see the attempt to control the sexual activity of women and the beginning of sexual objectification. By the late 19th Century abortion had been made illegal, and divorce become severely restricted.²⁷

The facts presented by Gailey and the conclusions she draws from them, confirm Engels’ theory regarding the origin of women’s oppression. The absence of gender hierarchy in pre-contact Tonga and the increasing subordination of women in conjunction with the development of classes and the state, is a clear indication of the relationship between class society and women’s oppression. Gailey argues that:

Gender stratification is created through changes in the political process, the forging of institutional means of *ensuring the survival of class relations*.

She adds:

As classes and state institutions emerge, the relative authority of women declines, but some women come to have social power through their class position

Gailey, however, disagrees with many Marxists and insists that gender hierar-

chy does not *stem from* class stratification, but rather is created *in conjunction with and influences* the actual formation of class division. Traditionally, Marxists would argue that class division comes first and gender hierarchy follows as a consequence. Gailey argues that the two take place at the same time and that gender hierarchy pushes the development of classes forward. From a dialectical perspective, both positions have some truth in them. The initial requirement for class stratification is the surplus of products, resulting from the advance in the means of production, but following that there are certain aspects like gender hierarchy and state formation which enable the stratification process to continue and deepen. They then continue to work in tandem mutually affirming one another. But it is important to understand that the initial change takes place in the real world of production, not in ideology. In addition, the form of oppressive institutions like gender hierarchy and the state can change and develop as the early class societies develop into feudalism and capitalism. However, the main purpose of these institutions remain the same; i.e. the preservation of class society.

The role of Christianity and the missions

In the years following the first European contact, many Christian missionaries were sent to Tonga in an attempt to ‘civilise’ the people of the islands. Several of the accounts we have of Tongan society come from these missionaries. Gailey argues that the Christian missionaries played a

²⁵As above p. 148

²⁶‘Marriage arrangements embodied strategies to consolidate rank or to support a title bid’ p. 75

²⁷‘Women found adulterous or guilty of ‘fornicating’ faced prison sentences, stiff fines, or labour service on royal plantations.’ (Erskine 1853/1967:130), ‘For example, abortion was defined as attempted manslaughter. Anyone found guilty of attempting to induce abortion had to “work for the king for twelve months”. (p. 205), ‘The restriction of divorce and the strengthening of husbands’ authority meant far less control over their sexuality for women.’(p. 205)

large role in the state formation process²⁸, and particularly in relation to the diminishing authority of women. She says for example that ‘The Wesleyan Methodists actively discouraged the exercise of sisters’ rights, because of the influence it had in keeping married women independent of their husbands and because it violated the sacredness of private property’²⁹ She goes on to explain this further using various examples of how the missionaries influenced the developing state structures including legislation. She puts a large emphasis on Christian ideology and the conversion of chiefly people to Christianity for the establishment of class society, rather than understanding that this process was a necessary development because of the contact with capitalism. Christianity simply provided a set of ideas which suited this development, and particularly suited the emerging ruling class. Gailey does accept this where she says: ‘Christian missionary activity in Tonga was supported by some chiefly groups, tolerated by others, and actively opposed by many. The theocratic and patriarchal ideology appealed to those chiefly factions who, with their supporters, attempted to cut themselves off from kin-associated obligations.’³⁰ However, throughout this section of the book her writing contradicts this statement and instead often seems to emphasize the influence of Christian *ideology* as opposed to the changing structures in the Tongan economy.

Some of the most interesting comments about Tongan society came from mission-

aries. They noticed how little people had to work in general³¹ and one of the priests made this remark:

The natives always look with suspicion upon any schemes involving the large employment of labour, from an idea that their individual effort, devoted to the same production of what is wanted, on their own personal account, will yield a better return than mere wages they might receive from an employer. They look on him as one trying to enrich himself at their expense.³²

Another said that: ‘The Veitongo villagers were shocked beyond measure that anyone could even think of selling food. Food was provided by nature and it seemed against the disposition of God that it should not be as free as flowers.’³³ Imagine what they would think if they had been told that they’d have to pay for water!

Other accounts by merchants on trading missions described the generous and peaceful nature of the Tongans³⁴, even to the extent of them throwing food items on to the merchant ships when they felt the trade deal had not been equal. Similar comments have been made about other pre class societies, showing us that human nature is not inherently selfish or violent but that the predominance of these negative traits stems from social conditions rather than biology or nature.

²⁸‘First the missionaries were concerned not only with conversion, but also with the development of commerce, cash-cropping and occupational specialisation.’ (p. 177)

²⁹As above p. 191

³⁰As above p. 172

³¹‘Early European travellers noted that Tongans seemed to assign hard work and menial tasks to men, even as they commented upon how little anyone worked.’ (p. 132)

³²(West 1846/1865:145)

³³(Ruhen 1966:49)

³⁴‘He noted that “they had not a single weapon about them” ’ (p. 153)

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of Tongan society over a few hundred years from a pre class society into a capitalist one provides a great example of the relationship between the rise of class society, gender hierarchy and state formation. It clearly shows how the development of classes influenced sexuality and the negative impact it had on women's authority and women's rights. In addition, it highlights the contradictory nature of the role of women in the pre contact period due to the emerging hierarchies in that society. These contradictions do not invalidate Engels' theory,

rather the positive aspects of women's authority in Tonga provide us with a sense of the equal nature of pre-class society, as well as what could be possible in a future classless society. However, the point of looking at the past is not to find a blue-print for relationships in a future socialist society, but simply to allow us to gain a better understanding of the origins of oppression to enable us to fight those oppressions today. If gender hierarchy developed in conjunction with class society and the state, then the feminist struggle must also be a struggle against capitalism for a socialist alternative.