

---

## Introduction

---

# An Environmental Puzzle

---



### 'Red Wave' Moving In

On 11 March, 2011, catastrophe struck Japan in the form of a devastating tsunami caused by a great submarine earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku. A tsunami warning was issued for the Pacific: a giant wave may be on the move to threaten the low-lying islands in its path. Having heard the emergency radio announcement, the town officer of Kotu Island in the Ha'apai group of Tonga was now out on the main footpath running through the village to warn people. *Peau kula*; the unfamiliar word drifted out of the darkness.

I was sitting in front of the house I was staying at during a short revisit to Kotu. I had done several field visits to the island since the 1980s but had previously not been back since 2004. I had come to learn how ceremonial food presentations in a village setting in Tonga compare with food presentations among Tongan migrants in New Zealand (see Perminow 2015). At 11 PM, the new moon was leaving the village path in deep darkness. The path was unusually busy though, with people moving from the 'low' (*lalo*) to the 'high' (*'uta*) end of the island. *Peau kula*; 'Red wave? What sort of wave is that?' I wondered. A few women stopped for a moment at the low fence surrounding the '*api*' ('home') I was staying in. One of them asked whether I had heard the radio announcement that a *peau kula* might be on its way towards us. She said that they were headed for the '*uta*, the garden lands occupying the slightly raised southern end of the island. Their rolled-up sleeping mats indicated that they meant to spend the night up there. As they were moving on, the loud voice of the town officer grew closer as he moved up the path from the 'lower end' (*lalo*) of the village. 'Attention all! A tsunami warning has been issued for Tonga. Bring food and water! Seek higher grounds and listen to the emergency updates of

Radio Tonga.’ He stopped outside the low fence and called me over: ‘They say on the news that there has been a great earthquake and a ‘red wave’ in Japan, killing many people. They say that a big wave is moving here and that it may come all the way to Tonga. It may get here in the early morning. So, leave for the garden lands before that time, eh ...’

People were by no means panic-stricken. Yet many appeared to heed the warning and made their way towards the raised garden lands during the small hours. At about 3:30 AM, the women and children from the neighbouring home came to make sure I was awake and ready to come with them to a recently cleared bush allotment in ‘uta. By that time, the village was calm and quiet. The assembly hall of the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga on the *mala’e* (‘village green’) where a handful of men earlier in the night had been drinking kava and watching a rugby match on satellite TV was now dark and silent. The ‘higher grounds’ of Kotu stand about 10 meters above sea level. As we made the short climb, someone mentioned that Kotu was lucky to have its garden lands on a hill in contrast to many other islands of Ha‘apai, which are very low and quite flat. Kotu Island is small though; no more than about 1,800 meters long and about 600 meters wide. With its raised southern end, some of Kotu’s people jokingly refer to it as the ‘toothbrush’ (*polosi fufulu nifo*). And indeed that is what it may look like when approached from the neighbouring Ha‘afeva Island to the east.

The prospect of facing a tsunami from the raised end of a ‘toothbrush’ should not be expected to produce a great sense of security. Nevertheless, there was no sense of urgency or anxiety among those who had sought shelter there. On the contrary, muted conversations, humorous comments and the sharing of biscuits, fruits and tea created more of an atmosphere of a recreational outing than one of impending doom. Some dozed, and others listened for updated news bulletins on Radio Tonga. Some said that they found it hard to believe that an earthquake in Japan at the far end of the Pacific would create waves reaching all the way to Tonga. Others recalled that over the last few years several tsunami warnings had been issued and then cancelled when no ‘red wave’ appeared.

Tonga lies just west of the International Date Line along the so-called Pacific Ring of Fire. Here the Pacific plate subducts beneath the Indo-Australian plate in the Tonga Trench, which causes frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Tongans are quite familiar with volcanic activities and know well that very few earthquakes are followed by ‘red waves’ but will recall the 8.1 magnitude submarine earthquake close to Samoa and the 6-meter ‘red wave’ that 5 minutes later hit Niuatoputapu Island in September 2009, destroying 90% of the houses and killing nine people. It came suddenly, with no warning; many people on Kotu expressed that

such events are not really ‘predictable’ (*me’a pau*; ‘certain thing’); that forces of nature often strike suddenly and without warning.

Except for myself, all who were gathered in the particular bush allotment where we sought shelter from the *peau kula* in March 2011 were women and children. This made me wonder whether the menfolk might have less faith than the women in the tsunami prediction, or whether it might be considered unmanly to abandon their homes and the village in favour of the garden lands. When I asked my companions if the men remained in the village, the women around me said no. They said that I was the only man with no sister among the women present. ‘The sister is taboo. They stay away because of “respect” (*faka’apa’apa*) and seek shelter in other bush allotments,’ one of the women said.

As night turned into day and the predicted time of the ‘red wave’ came and passed, people gradually returned to another normal day in the village. The only effect of the earthquake in Japan on Kotu’s big lagoon was that the ebb tide turned midway down the beach and came in again a few feet further inland than the last high tide. Over the next couple of days, conversations with village men tended to touch upon the subject of who had chosen to make a stand, to *nofo ‘i ‘api* (‘to remain in the homestead’), and who had chosen to seek safety, to *hola ki ‘uta* (‘to flee to the garden lands’). In a conversation with a steward in one of Kotu’s churches, people’s choice of where to spend the night of the tsunami warning turned into a moral question; a telling test of personal courage and faith. Replying to the question of where I had spent the previous night, I used the verbal *‘alu*, signifying simply ‘to go’: ‘I went with the people of the neighbouring homestead to the garden lands and stayed there until morning. What about you?’ ‘Oh, so you “fled to the garden lands” (*hola ki ‘uta*) eh ...,’ he stated with a deadpan look, and went on: ‘Well me, I remained in my home doing my *lotu* [‘praying’], trusting that God “shelters” [*le’ohi*] me.’

Many women, though, had claimed that most men actually spent the critical hours of the night on the elevated garden lands. The men encountered returning from the *‘uta* the next morning were bringing back firewood or crops just as they would on any other Saturday in preparation for the following day of rest and worship, and therefore it was difficult to find out where men had actually spent the night and quite impossible to find men willing to admit to having ‘fled to the gardens’.

Whether men actually remained in their homes or just said that they did so, their self-presentation as someone choosing to stand their ground rather than to flee in the face of potential disaster seemed to render the tsunami threat as a test of faith and moral fibre. More generally, I take their self-presentation to indicate that morality and calamity involving the elements and forces that surround people’s lives may be mutually entangled in

Tonga. I do believe that a focus on such mutual entanglement is essential in order to understand how people perceive, explain and respond to dramatic events or changes in the environment of which they are part. Thus, I believe that a focus on people's perceptions of and engagements with the components, forces and dynamics they understand to surround their lives offers rich ground for discovering enduring ideas and practices underpinning sociality.

Many people on Kotu, then, appeared quite unperturbed by the tsunami warning in 2011. They were seemingly sceptical of the notion that such phenomena may be predicted and thus had limited faith in the human capacity to predict or control future destructive events. Just as Donner has argued to be the case regarding Fijian attitudes to weather as well as climate change, many Tongans appear to believe that destructive natural events lie within the 'Domain of the gods' (Donner 2007). This is clearly not because they are seldom affected by destructive consequences of forceful natural events. On the contrary, the effects of powerful and quite unpredictable natural events caused by Tonga's location at the Pacific Ring of Fire as well as within the cyclone belt are frequently demonstrated. Just six weeks prior to the tsunami warning of March 2011, Kotu was struck by a category 4 tropical cyclone. Cyclone Wilma had made an unexpected turn southward from Samoa to wreak havoc in Western Ha'apai before moving on towards New Zealand. The houses mostly withstood winds approaching 185 km/h, but many trees did not. According to those who were there, the waves had engulfed the lower part of the island. Indeed, the Tonga Islands, according to Patricia Fall, '... lie in the track of tropical cyclones, being struck by an average of two cyclones per year' (Fall 2010: 254). On 11 January, 2014, Kotu and the rest of the islands of Western Ha'apai remained on the outskirts of a category 5 tropical cyclone. Cyclone Ian did strike the islands of Eastern Ha'apai though, destroying 80% of the houses on Lifuka island. And in February 2016, the northern islands of Tonga narrowly escaped the tremendous destructive force of category 5 cyclone Winston. He brushed by Vava'u before veering westward to hit Fiji with wind gusts of more than 300 km/h, killing forty-four people.

Attitudes to predictions as well as the consequences of natural calamities are founded on experiential familiarity with forceful and dynamic realities that in Tim Ingold's terms may be said to make up a 'weather-world' (see Ingold 2011: 129–31). Experiences with 'weather-world' realities provide frequent instances of announced calamities being cancelled and destructive forces surprisingly and suddenly heading elsewhere after all.

## *Mole e fonua*; ‘Losing Land’

Not all events or changes affecting the surroundings with which Kotu people routinely engage are as sudden or dramatic as ‘red waves’ or tropical cyclones but may be a more serious threat in the long run. Thus, in 2011 it was mentioned by Kotu people who had moved to Tonga’s capital, Nuku‘alofa, that Kotu ‘loses land’ (*mole e fonua*) on the island’s ‘weather coast’ (*liku*) to the west. ‘I haven’t been there to see it for myself,’ said a church minister who had moved from Kotu to Tongatapu, ‘but I have heard that land has disappeared on the weather coast’ ...

They say that for some years now the sea ‘enters land’ (*hū ki he fonua*) when the tide is very high. I have heard that a lot of the ‘forest’ (*vao*) is already dead. There is a Tongan saying which fits the predicament of Kotu well: *Si‘isi‘i e kuma, toe vela hono hiku!* [Not only was the palm rat tiny, but it also burnt its tail!].

The saying speaks to the fact that as one of the smallest of Tonga’s islands Kotu has little land to lose. ‘Maybe when you go there, you could check it out for yourself,’ he suggested.

Shortly after arriving in Kotu Island itself, I encountered a villager in his late seventies on the footpath between the waterfront and the lower part of the village and asked him about the rumours I had heard about the dying forest and the loss of land on the west coast of the island. ‘Yes, so I’ve heard too,’ he replied, ‘but I haven’t been there to examine it with my own eyes yet.’ His answer was quite puzzling, since the area in question was just a few hundred meters from where we were standing. As it turned out, he was far from the only one on Kotu who claimed that they had not yet examined with their own eyes (*teeki ai fakasio*) what was going on in the *vao*, the forest between the village and the *liku* coast.

Moving on from the encounter with the old man, I went finally to see for myself what was happening inside the *vao* and at the *liku* coast. The standing stones surrounding two former freshwater pools at the entrance to the *vao* could barely be discerned at the edge of an extensive and very muddy swamp. In the 1980s and 90s, these two pools (*vaitupu*) had routinely been used by people to rinse off saltwater after swimming in the sea. Trees still grew on the *langi*, the ‘chiefly burial mound’ – known as *Langi tu‘u lilo*, ‘The hidden burial mound’ – behind the two pools. Now, however, the mound was wholly surrounded by a swamp where dead and leafless trees and tree stumps were sticking out of a mudflat running to the sand barrier that separates the interior land from the beach.

Previously, the coast could be reached by walking under a canopy of dense forest along a path known by the elders as the *Hala siulolovao* – a

very old name, which indicated that the walkway had been in existence for long enough to be considered a permanent feature of the landscape; it may be translated as ‘Going under the forest to catch fish’ (Churchward 1959: 433). Now, however, the path had disappeared altogether in the swamp. Jumping from tree stump to tree stump, it was barely possible to get across the mudflat to the weather coast. For a stretch of a few hundred meters up and down the sandy barrier between the beach and the interior land, littoral bushes were either dead or dying. Presumably, they were being nurtured by a saltier concoction than they could handle. Apparently, the natural sandy barrier had become an insufficient sea wall to protect the low-lying area within from the surrounding sea.

Compared to the conditions of the low-lying area in the 1980s and 1990s, the contrast was striking. The landscape had been transformed totally from a dense forest used by people to collect firewood, wild fruits and ingredients for ‘waters of healing’ (*vai tonga*) to a swamp covering a substantial part of the low-lying area between the weather coast and the village.

As mentioned, the standing stones that marked the place where the two secluded pools used to be were barely perceptible – submerged in the swamp. Some of the elders called the pools by their ancient names: *Veifua* and *Tōkilangi*.<sup>2</sup> They were mostly referred to, however, as *Vai tangata*



**Figure 0.1.** The dying *vao* (‘forest’) between the village and the *liku* weather coast on Kotu Island in 2011. © Arne Aleksej Perminow.



**Figure 0.2.** *Vai tangata/Veifua* pool in the forest between the village and the *liku* weather coast on Kotu island in 1986. © Arne Aleksej Perminow.



**Figure 0.3.** *Vai fefine/Tōkिलangi* pool in the forest between the village and the *liku* weather coast on Kotu Island in 2011. © Arne Aleksej Perminow.

(‘Men’s water’) and *Vai fefine* (‘Women’s water’) because of gendered use. The famous explorer Captain James Cook was shown the two pools when he disembarked on Kotu on his Second Voyage in 1777 (Beaglehole 1967: 120–21). So the pools were clearly a notable feature of the Kotu landscape two centuries ago. In 2011, however, the pools, like the path, had been claimed by the swamp.

*Langi tu’u lilo* (the hidden burial mound), like the pools and the path, had according to oral tradition been around for centuries and was associated with the high ranking chief Tungī Māna’ia, who lived in the seventeenth century. Some believed that what he had touched during a visit had become *tapu* (‘taboo’) because of Tungī Māna’ia’s high rank as the son of the daughter of Tu’i Tonga’s sister, the *tamahā*. Thus, the things he had touched were buried in the mound. Others believed that it was one of Tungī’s concubines related to Taufatōfua, traditional chief of Kotu and Tōfua islands, who was buried there. Finally, some claimed that Tungī Māna’ia himself had been buried there with his ‘whale-tooth neck-rest’ (*kali lei*) when he died on his way back from Tōfua island in the west to Tungua island east of Kotu.

Though still enigmatic, the mound was now definitely no longer hidden in the forest but stood out as a dry spot jutting out of a sea of mud. This transformation of the landscape did not, however, appear to preoccupy people greatly in 2011. Only a vague knowledge of environmental changes appeared to have reached beyond the island; no knowledge of it at all appeared to have reached beyond the Tongan Islands to overseas migrants. Thus, Tongans living overseas who originate from Kotu had not heard about the change in local sea level or its effects when I posted pictures on their Facebook group (*Kotu ‘iloa he lotu moe poto*) documenting the transformation in 2013. On Kotu itself, people appeared inclined to turn a blind eye to the changes. They were disinclined to dwell on them amongst themselves or broadcast the news about the changes beyond the confines of the island. As mentioned, many claimed not to have ‘examined it with their own eyes’ and few volunteered any theories about what might be causing the transformation.

A man in his early sixties whose homestead was located in the low-lying end of the village reported that not just storm surges but ordinary spring tides occasionally came right across the island to the very edge of his village allotment. But even he appeared quite unperturbed by this new development. The sea apparently first of all enters the interior across a natural sand barrier running along the weather coast, so stopping this overflow into the low-lying land seemed, in principle, conceivable. But in 2011 there had been no discussions or initiatives to construct some sort of wall or reinforce the sand barrier to keep the sea out. I wondered whether the town officer had reported the changes taking place to regional or central authorities, but no one knew of any initiatives taken to spread the news of the intruding sea.



This apparent lack of interest in the environmental changes that were taking place was all the more striking given that some changes were having a noticeable impact on everyday routines. A few days after the tsunami warning in 2011, I was sitting next to a woman in her late sixties one afternoon on the beach in front of the village. We were gazing out over the big lagoon waiting for the fishermen to return. ‘Do you remember the time before, when you first came here, how the women used to collect shellfish and seaweed on the reef?’ I arched my eyebrows as Tongans conventionally do to confirm something. She continued:

Some say that it is because the women have become too lazy, but that is a lie! The sea is too deep now! Earlier we could walk all around the reef at low tide. We could walk out to places abounding in seaweed and shellfish and collect it in our baskets. But now the sea is too deep for us to get to those places even at low tide. The women do not dive, so now we cannot reach down to collect them. A thing happened a few years ago ... I think it was in 2006 ... There was a very big earthquake. And since that time the tide has not yet become really low again.

No one could volunteer any theories about what might be causing the transformation and seemed just as inclined to dwell on the benefits of the changes as its disadvantages. ‘Do you remember how difficult it was to enter the lagoon at low tide in the past?’ one man asked, and he continued: ‘Nowadays the tide is never really low anymore so we may enter and leave the lagoon “whenever we please” (*noa ‘ia pē*; lit. ‘whimsically, indiscriminately’).’ Another man was sure that the recent environmental transformation had reduced Kotu’s mosquito problem:

The ‘forest’ (*vao*) and the two pools within it used to be breeding grounds for a lot of mosquitos before. Nowadays mosquitos are no longer a problem. Some of the young men went to Nomuka Island and brought back some *lapila* fish<sup>3</sup> from the big lake there. The *lapila* fish thrive in the muddy and brackish waters where the *vao* used to be. They are very useful, for they eat a lot of mosquitos. Now there are very few mosquitos on Kotu.

People seemed disinclined, then, to dwell on possible causes and the negative consequences of the quite radical transformation that had taken place over the first decennium of the twenty-first century. Also, they seemed markedly disinterested in spreading news beyond the island itself about what was going on in their immediate environment, even to people originating from Kotu. This may appear all the more puzzling in light of the establishment of a Pacific Adaptation Strategy Assistance Program (PASAP) in 2010 on nearby Lifuka, the main island of the administrative

region to which Kotu belongs. Amongst other things, the project aims to assess precisely the vulnerability and adaptation to the rise in sea level that has occurred on Lifuka and which has caused significant erosion along the west coast. Apparently, the rise in sea level over the first decennium of the twenty-first century was significantly higher than expected based on global measurements or models and has most likely been caused by significant local subsidence of the land due to tectonic events within the Pacific Ring of Fire. According to the National Coordinator of the program, Lifuka was chosen as the site for the pilot project 'because it had already experienced sea level rise as a result of an earthquake in May 2006. The earthquake measured approximately 7.9 on the Richter scale resulting in a subsidence of 23 cm of the western side of the Lifuka Island' (Kitekei'aho 2012). It seems likely that the rising sea level on Kotu resulting in the end to low tide seaweed and shellfish collecting also prompted the establishment of the PASAP. However, news about the project had not reached Kotu in 2011 nor by my next visit in 2014. And likewise, news of Kotu's recent environmental changes had not reached Lifuka nor the Tongan Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change in the Tongan capital, Nuku'alofa on Tongatapu.

## An Environmental Puzzle

With the global focus on climate change, as well as the interest within Tonga and within the Pacific region in general in the environmental consequences of rising sea levels, one might have thought people on Kotu would have found it in their interest to call attention to the ongoing environmental changes that are significantly affecting their lives. They, however, clearly thought otherwise. This book aims to produce an ethnography that may contribute to solving the puzzle of why they thought otherwise. Why the seemingly unshaken confidence in being safe in the face of dramatic and potentially catastrophic environmental events? Why the apparent calm acceptance, even complacency or secrecy, with regard to the drastic transformation of the forest? Why had so many people not yet gone 'to examine with their own eyes' the disappearance of historical landmarks contained in the forest, such as the two freshwater pools of *Veifua* and *Tōkilangi*, which attracted Cook's attention two and a half centuries ago? What about the loss of the path for 'Going under the forest to catch fish' (*Hala siulolovao*)? Or the threat that the 'Hidden mound' (*Langi tu'ulilo*), which links Kotu to the ancient and high-ranking lineage of *Tungī Māna'ia*, may soon disappear into the mud? Why the reluctance to see the consequences of the environmental changes as negative and the eagerness to look for the positive? Why the easy acceptance of the current state of affairs in their 'homeland', their *fonua*?

In order to solve the puzzle of why this was so, I suggest that it is useful to explore people's engagements with and understandings of the world that surrounds them. By exploring how people in the course of everyday life engage components, forces and dynamics in their surroundings, I aim to discover what Husserl once labelled 'a common horizon of expectations' (see Shore 1996: 282); a horizon of expectations contributing to make dramatic events and environmental changes in the surroundings meaningful to people and thus colour their attitudes toward them. By engaging environments in Tonga, I aim to produce insight into a particular cultural perspective on the relationship between people and the forces in their surroundings. By doing so, I hope also to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between people and environment in general and human responsiveness to environmental changes. The pieces for solving the puzzle have been collected through field visits over three decades. Although some of the data relate to quite recent events and ongoing environmental change, most of the pieces were collected long before and not with this particular puzzle in mind. The bulk of the ethnography of the book has been produced by having a sustained focus on routines of perceiving and engaging components and dynamics of the environment in order to explore the relationship between everyday experience, cultural aesthetics and sociality. In my view, such an exploration provides a promising point of departure for understanding people's puzzling attitudes to the environmental events and changes taking place on Kotu. I propose, then, to engage with the everyday life challenges and opportunities of people in Tonga. Thus, I also hope to show how knowledge embedded in people's everyday involvement with their surroundings may make it possible to discover as well as to deepen our understanding of cultural perspectives on what is true, what is beautiful, what is valuable and what is right. And as Mike Hulme has pointed out in *Why We Disagree about Climate Change* (Hulme 2009), precisely what people hold to be true, beautiful, valuable and right are key for understanding attitudes and responses to ongoing environmental changes. Most of the chapters of the book are devoted to producing insights into the interrelatedness of environmental and sociocultural dynamics. It is my belief that such insights are essential for an understanding of local attitudes and responses to ongoing environmental changes. Before moving on to an ethnographic exploration of environmental engagements and the aesthetics and sociality of everyday life, it is necessary to give a brief account of why people's everyday environmental engagement is somewhat underexposed in Tongan ethnography and what kinds of theoretical perspectives and methodology might be most helpful in exposing its significance.

## Cultural Continuity in Engaging Environments

This book takes as its point of departure a mystery; the puzzling responses to the tsunami threat in March 2011 and to the environmental changes taking place on Kotu. But more than that, it is a book that explores the relationship between people and the environment in order to discover characteristic aspects of the make-up of the local world. One of the basic assumptions of the analysis is that the exploration of experience and knowledge related to everyday environmental dynamics makes it possible to discover widely shared notions about the makings of the world that are mostly taken for granted – what in Bloch's terms 'goes without saying' (Bloch 1992) as a largely mute background in people's conceptualization of society. In Eric Hirsch's terms from *The Anthropology of Landscape* (Hirsch 1995), I wish to develop a procedure of discovery to produce an ethnography that brings to the 'foreground' notions that tend to be taken for granted as part of 'background' realities (ibid.: 22–23) in people's lives. It is my view that knowledge and practices of coping with the everyday dynamics of the immediate environment remain an untapped resource for social analysis in Tonga and elsewhere in Polynesia. The idea is simple: people's responses to environmental events and changes do not happen in a cultural or historical vacuum. They must be informed by what people know about their world and how and why things happen in it. Through a focus on people's routines of referring to and engaging with components and dynamics that constitute their environment, the book aims to discover the characteristics of what people know and take for granted about the world that has been 'given' to them. Thus, the title, *Engaging Environments in Tonga*, is intended to imply that a focus on people's everyday engagements with their environment may produce a privileged point of departure for discovering fundamental notions that people share about the world around them. The subtitle, *Cultivating Beauty and Nurturing Relations in a Changing World*, is intended to imply that such shared notions may in turn illuminate the manner in which Kotu people aestheticized social events, talked about social and moral values and constituted social relationships.

Theoretically, the emphasis on the benefits of engaging environments for understanding cultural values and social dynamics is indebted to perspectives that understand humans as sentient beings intimately involved with environments that are made up of a lot of things other than people. Ingold emphasizes that man shares with other living organisms the capacity to engage with components of their environment, and like him I hold that in contrast to other living organisms people have the ability to disengage from the affordances of the environment and that this ability 'allows people to essentialise ranges of utilities, turning them into external objects that may be referred to' (Ingold 1992:

42–44). Thus, there are two modes of being in the world: ‘It may be a feature of the human condition that we can switch back and forth between engagement and disengagement, between outward-directed action and inward-directed thought’ (ibid.: 42–44). The current analysis has an ambition to explore the relationship between the two modes of being in the world. I hold that people’s practical experiences with the qualities and components of their surroundings involve a kind of lived knowing from which their outlook on the world and what goes on in it can be understood along with what people hold to be true, beautiful and right. My emphasis on the potential for gaining insight into important notions that mostly go without saying by focusing on knowledge and experience in people’s immediate environment is not, of course, an argument that this is the only environment people experience and have knowledge of. The Kingdom of Tonga as well as the island of Kotu had become part of global economic, political, religious and educational systems long before my first field visits there. George Marcus, who did fieldwork among Tongan chiefly elites in the 1970s, coined the term ‘compromise culture’ (Marcus 1980: 10) to describe the Tongan blend of traditions, values and social institutions two centuries after Captain James Cook first visited Tonga in the 1770s. Before that, Tongans, by their own navigational skills and those of other Pacific peoples, were interconnected within extensive regional economic, political and religious systems (Hau’ofa 1994; Besnier 2011: 37–38). As Nico Besnier demonstrates in *On the Edge of the Global* – a more recent analysis of modern Tongan anxieties – the steep growth in recent decades of flows of people, money, objects and ideas has intensified global entanglements, which are interwoven into the fabric of Tongan modernity. Tonga is culturally quite homogenous in the sense that people, whether they live in a small remote island of Ha’apai, the capital or even overseas, share quite fundamental ideas of what is valuable, what is beautiful and what is appropriate. In terms of the rhythms, practices and realities of everyday life, however, the differences between an urban and a village setting were certainly considerable when I did my first fieldwork in Tonga in 1986–87 and 1991–92. While people in the capital had cars and electricity – fridges, freezers, TVs and telephones – and acquired most of their food in shops or the Talamahu food market in the centre of Nuku’alofa, people on Kotu still got their food from fishing and farming and relied only on radio or post collected at the post office on neighbouring Ha’afeva island for news and announcements. Although everybody staying on Kotu in the late 1980s and early 1990s had close kin who had moved away to make a living elsewhere, very few of them had yet migrated out of Tonga to ‘seek a life’ (*kumi mo’ui*) abroad. Thus, the flow of money, things or news to Kotu from overseas migrants was still quite weak and slow. In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, a sharp increase in the number of overseas migrants originating from Kotu and a telecommunication revolution brought the rest

of the world much closer. In 2011, solar technology made lighting affordable, significantly affecting people's everyday lives, with all homes on Kotu benefiting. Output from solar energy was still much too low, however, for cooking or keeping food cold, so it hardly affected patterns of production, distribution and consumption. Some homes acquired gas stoves and a few also washing machines powered by diesel aggregates, but people still mostly did the laundry manually and cooked on open fires and in earth ovens in order to save expenses on fuel. All in all, the rhythm and realities of local production, distribution and consumption were remarkably stable in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. I do believe that the differences in the rhythms and realities of everyday living have an impact on the discovery of enduring ideas about what is valuable, beautiful and appropriate. A strong continuity with the past in daily routines made the village sociality of Kotu in the 1980s and 1990s a quite suitable point of departure for discovering the more enduring components of the cultural complexity that constitutes Tongan modernity. Thus, I feel that a methodology overdetermined by the facts of modernity and global integration could have the consequence of diminishing the potential for discovering enduring semantic structures – how the world is experienced and makes sense to people. Structures of the *longue durée* (Braudel, see Howard and Borofsky 1989: 249) – the 'essential dynamics' of 'streams of cultural traditions ... exhibiting an empirical cluster of certain elements in syndromes that tend to persist over time' (Barth 1989: 131) – may easily be lost if following loops of global integration is not complemented by following threads of local signification.

In practical terms, my methodology is characterized by an interest in cultural perspectives produced by the fact that all places are connected to wider worlds by open-ended flows of persons, things and ideas as well as local conditions, routines of everyday life and ideas about reality. Thus, I see no reason why an awareness of the significance of global forces driving socio-cultural change should reduce the ethnographic appetite for following the locally constituted conditions of cultural production of the present. From the outset, the production of an ethnography on Tonga seemed to rest on an idea of contemporary cultural inauthenticity. Five years before the publication of 'Tongan Society' (Gifford 1929), which was the first ethnographic account of Tonga made by a professional ethnographer, Gifford wrote 'a pioneer paper on acculturation' (Keesing 1947: 36) called 'Euro-American Acculturation in Tonga' (Gifford 1924a). By the time of the Second World War, the awareness among students of Polynesian culture of contemporary inauthenticity seems to have made urgency the predominant characteristic of cultural research: 'Changes under way will not wait for observers, and the need for pushing acculturation studies is urgent' (Keesing 1947: 39). Ernest and Pearl Beaglehole's book, based on eight weeks of fieldwork in the Pangai village of Vava'u just before the war (Beaglehole 1944), represented

a rather isolated effort to collect material about everyday village living in Tonga. Others like Gifford (Gifford 1929), Collocott (Collocott 1919; 1921; 1928) and, later, Bott (Bott 1958; 1981; 1982) turned to those recognized to be most knowledgeable about authentic Tongan traditions of the past to salvage as much as possible before it was too late. However, the bias of Tongan ethnographic production in favour of the centre and elite traditions is probably first of all a result of what one of Marcus' Tongan informants called the 'aristocentrism' (Marcus 1980: 26) of Tongan society itself. Tongan conceptions of the distribution of knowledge about the 'Tongan way' (*anga fakatonga*) involve an ideological orientation around summits and centre. I think Biersack was right in pointing out that part of the reason 'the elite have continued to have a strong presence in scholarly writing about Tonga' is:

the important role Queen Salote played as patron of anthropological and historical efforts, her interest in codifying elite practices and knowledge, and her sponsorship of particular scholars' efforts – ones such as Elizabeth Bott, Edward Winslow Gifford, Adrienne Kaepler, and Sione Latukefu who have had a powerful impact on Tongan historiography and the anthropologist's perception of what there is to know about Tonga. (Biersack 1994: 3)

The aristocentrism of Tongan society combined with a sense of ethnographic urgency may seem to have synchronized scholarly efforts and the efforts of the Tongan elite to salvage the cultural heritage before it disappeared. I do not wish to suggest that the combination of scholarly and political urgencies in the history of Tongan ethnographic production has failed to produce useful ethnographies and interesting analyses of Tongan traditions. On the contrary, it has resulted in the collection and analyses of valuable material by Bott (Bott 1972a; 1972b), Leach (Leach 1972) Kaepler (Kaepler 1985; 1990; 1993), Gunson (Gunson 1990) Valeri (Valeri 1989), Herda (Herda 1990), Māhina (Māhina 1990) and others that would otherwise, no doubt, have been lost. Rather, the point is that Tongan 'aristocentrism' combined with scholarly and elitist urgencies may seem to have created a force field of Tongan ethnographic production that deflects cultural research away from the practices of contemporary everyday interaction, away from commoners and away from local community studies. Methodologically, this means that the archives, the centres and the knowledge of specialists have attracted more interest than village life, local knowledge of the present and a *contemporary* cosmology/world view. After seventy years of ethnographic production in Tonga, Paul van der Grijp's publishers were thus able to claim that his book *Islanders of the South* '... is the first book to examine the interplay of Polynesian and Western ideas within contemporary social and economic practices, not from the point

of view of Tongan aristocracy, but from that of the common people' (Van der Grijp 1993a). Some village studies concerning aspects of commoners' strategies for coping with everyday realities have been undertaken, however, although only three seem to have resulted in books (Beaglehole 1944; Topouniua 1986; Perminow 1993a), with the rest comprising unpublished theses and numerous articles focusing on then contemporary ideas of kinship and village practices, written in the 1960s and 1970s by such scholars as Aoyagi (Aoyagi 1966), Decktor Korn (Decktor Korn 1974; 1975; 1976), Rogers (Rogers 1968; 1975; 1977) and K. Morton (Morton 1972; 1976; 1987). Since the late twentieth century, an interest in Tongan 'compromise culture' – defined as a '... complex of institutions, ideas, and practices, which integrates earlier Tongan culture with a version of *Papalangi* (European) culture' (Marcus 1980: 10; see also Howard and Borofsky 1989: 207) and characterized by changing gender relations and social changes relatable to the complex of migration, globalization and westernization (James 1983; 1990; 1991; Gailey 1987; 1990; Herda 1987; Cowling 1990a; Van der Grijp 1993b; Perminow 1993a; 1993b) – has dominated ethnographic production about contemporary Tonga. It is my belief that in the gap between the valuable works of cultural reconstruction of pre-contact Tonga and insights into the realities of contemporary cultural compromises sensitized to the significance of global impacts there is ample room to supplement the body of Tongan ethnography by delving deeply into the domain of local knowledge – that is, the conceptualizations of phenomena encountered by people experiencing and coping with local realities.

The first part of the book engages the immediate surroundings to produce insights about the make-up of the local world that has been 'given' to people and that is, thus, largely taken for granted. In the second part of the book, these insights will be used as a basis for approaching the enduring cultural significance of 'beauty' (*faka'ofa'ofa*) and 'orderliness' (*maau*) in ritual aesthetics and of 'compassion' (*'ofa*) and 'nurture' (*tauhi*) for sociality. The subtitle of this book, *Cultivating Beauty and Nurturing Relations in a Changing World*, is used to indicate that ritual aesthetics and sociality does not take place in a stable reality. Rather, they take place in a changing world that constantly transforms between different states or phases of being as tides move in and out, as day dawns and night falls, as the moon waxes and wanes, as the seasons change and as weather changes. Thus, the different phases or states of their surroundings afford people who routinely experience and cope with them very different opportunities to engage with and reflect upon the qualities of their environment and inform their understanding of the world and its workings.

This book, then, seeks to explore how engaging environments and their dynamics may improve our understanding of cultural aesthetics and



sociality. It is my view that an effort to discover enduring and resilient ideas about what is real, what is effective, what is valuable, what is beautiful and what is appropriate is important for understanding people's responses and attitudes to things happening around them. Thus, this ethnography aims to discover the characteristics of how the realities of existence are seen to play out in everyday environmental dynamics. It aims to show how these dynamics are relevant for ideas of what must be done to achieve results in everyday production and what characterizes ceremonial aesthetics and notions of beauty and value, which in their turn constitute an important basis for relating to one another and to act appropriately. Finally, in the concluding chapter of the book, this ethnography of engagements with environmental dynamics in everyday routines, of cultivation of beauty in ceremonial events, and of nurturing relations in everyday sociality, will be crucial for a grounded understanding of local attitudes and responses to ongoing environmental changes.

## Notes

1. The so-called brother-sister taboo involving constraints of conduct and avoidance related to eating and sleeping arrangements among cross-sex siblings and first, second and third cousins, who are all classified as *tuofefine-tuonga'ane* (sister-brother) vis-à-vis one another.
2. According to Churchward, *veifua* or *'umu veifua* signifies 'first cooked food presented to women after marriage or confinement or to shark-catchers on their return' (Churchward 1959: 537), while *Tökilangi* might signify 'dedicated to chiefly burial mound' (ibid.: 482). Thus, the ancient names of the two pools seem to relate both to the path *Hala siulolovao* running between the pools and into the forest and the ancient chiefly burial mound *Langi tu'u lilo* just behind them.
3. *Lapila* is the Tongan term for a kind of tilapia fish endemic to freshwater lakes in Africa and which is farmed extensively in Asia. It has been introduced to some areas in Africa as a measure to control malaria mosquitoes. *Lapila* were probably introduced to Tongan volcanic and brackish lakes in the twentieth century.