

Consumption and Cosmopolitanism: Practicing Modernity at the Second-Hand Marketplace in Nuku'alofa, Tonga

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Abstract

At the second-hand marketplace in Nuku'alofa, the capital of Tonga, Tongans buy and sell objects that their diasporic relatives send them instead of remittances. While selling objects goes against the grain of a traditional moral order, the marketplace is immensely popular but dominated by local Others. It enables participants to articulate and practice consumption and, more generally, a modern but locally relevant self, while at the same time quietly challenge the generally accepted assumption that high-ranking or wealthy elites control modernity. [modernity, consumption, cosmopolitanism, flea markets, second-hand trade, remittances, Tonga]

Shop owners in downtown Nuku'alofa, the capital city of Tonga, are in an uproar. Sales are down, and have been steadily decreasing for several years since the latter part of the 1990s. Meanwhile, second-hand marketplaces, or *fea* (from English "fair"), have been noticeably increasing in size, prominence, and popularity. For shop owners, the correlation is obvious: *fea* sellers are hijacking their customers. Furthermore, they are doing so in underhanded ways: while

most merchandise sold in both Nuku'alofa shops and the *fea* is imported from overseas, goods sold at the *fea* are brought in as personal effects, and therefore are subject to only minimal or no import duties, in contrast to the substantial sums that shop owners have to fork out to clear merchandise (e.g., 52% on sports clothing, plus 20% port handling). Other circumstances contribute to the creation of what shop owners deem to be unfair competition: small-scale *fea* traders receive their goods from relatives overseas as gifts that supplement or replace cash remittances, which have long figured prominently in the economic panorama of the vigorously diasporic Tongan society. As a result, they can afford to sell their wares at dramatically deflated prices, in contrast to shop owners, who have to at least recoup the wholesale prices of the goods they sell.¹

However, what makes the *fea* so attractive to many segments of Tongan society goes beyond a concern for maximizing profits and finding a bargain. I argue here that, in addition to being a context in which sellers and customers aim to exchange commodities for money, the Nuku'alofa *fea* is a prime site where Tongans “practice” modernity in its different and sometimes contested forms. By “practice” I refer, in step with classic definitions (e.g., Bourdieu 1977), to “anything people do,” particularly acts that have “intentional and unintentional political implications” (Ortner 1984:149). But I also foreground connotations of the term that highlight the tentative, developmental, performative, and co-constructed nature of activity. This perspective on practice, which aligns it with what Ferguson (1999) terms “cultural style,” takes selective inspirations from theories of performativity (e.g., Butler 1990), although the materials I will discuss emphasize the uncertainty-generating role of “citationality,” rather than its confirmatory power. For example, I explore how the people I observed engage in a complex set of activities about which they are not always entirely sure: for example, displaying their familiarity with a desirable modern lifestyle, morally appraising various tokens of modernity, and comparing modern lifestyles with practices that are branded as “traditional.” “Practicing” in its literal sense also subsumes repeating, which is entirely appropriate here, since the modernity that agents practice at the *fea* foregrounds consumption, a sphere of social action in which reiteration plays a crucial role (Appadurai 1996:66-70).

Identifying the Nuku'alofa second-hand marketplace as a site where participants practice modernity requires explication, for a number of reasons. First, the definition and control of modernity in this highly stratified society are a privilege of the elites, yet the marketplace is dominated by the non-privileged and the socially marginal, busy claiming a stake in how modernity is to be defined and incorporated in the local context. Second, the (relatively) shabby appearance, indecorous char-

acter, disorderly social composition, and geographical marginality of the *fea* contradict the dominant association of modernity with cleanliness, order, hierarchy, and centrality. Finally, the varied ways in which participants orient themselves to modernity display its multiply layered nature, which is at once moral, psychological, material, interactional, and political, despite dominant local understandings of modernity as a reasonably unified phenomenon. In short, the second-hand marketplace in Tonga embodies all the complexities and contradictions that arise in the construction of modernity and of the traditional order with which it is contrasted, complexities and contradictions that this paper seeks to unravel.

My analysis is grounded in contemporary approaches to consumption that seek to embed acts of consumption into a social and symbolic context, thereby transcending a simplistic understanding of these acts as the operationalization of a rationality of cost minimization and profit maximization (Appadurai 1986, Applbaum 1998, Bourdieu 1985, Douglas and Isherwood 1979, Miller, ed., 1995a, Rutz and Orlove, eds., 1989). While various approaches differ in terms of how they analyze the social-cultural meaning of consumption, from the Durkheimian integrative role that Douglas and Isherwood ascribe to consuming, to the conflictual role that Bourdieu and others attribute to it, they all agree on the simple premise that the specific meaning of consumption practices must be sought in terms of local socio-cultural dynamics, like other aspects of modernity (e.g., Appadurai 1996, Miller, ed., 1995b, Wilson and Dissanayake, eds., 1996). In particular, consumption makes it possible for agents to fashion ways of thinking and acting that may diverge from and undermine the received patterns endorsed by elites, political and economic institutions, and other loci of power. In a society that is at once peripheral to the capitalist world from which consumption emanates and deeply connected to this world through its diaspora, agents filter consumption through local tastes and moralities, but do so in ways that do not necessarily reject outright what they deem locally distasteful. In addition, different local groups and agents perform morality- and taste-imbued acts of consumption for different purposes. While this paper joins a substantial literature that emphasizes that we need to seek to understand how consumption “works” in terms of a local context, it also argues that the local may itself be complex, and that modernity can have different meanings for different agents.

Tonga and the Tongan Diaspora

The Nuku’alofa *fea* is one of the most visible points of articulation between the two elements that make up Tongan society: on the one hand, the 100,000 in-

habitants of the 36 inhabited islands of Tonga, spread in a north-south arc on the western edge of Polynesia, and, on the other hand, an almost equally populous diaspora dispersed throughout the Pacific Basin. Nuku'alofa is the social centre of gravity of both the island-based and diasporic segments of Tongan society. A town of about 25,000 inhabitants located on the north shore of Tongatapu, the largest island of the group, it is home to the country's sovereign and the locus of all consequential governmental, economic, and social activities.

The Tongan diaspora consists of communities and persons scattered throughout the world, but concentrated in the urban centers of New Zealand and Australia, as well as Hawai'i, the San Francisco Bay Area, Greater Los Angeles, and Utah. The enormous impact that diasporic dispersal has had on all material and symbolic aspects of Tonga is particularly striking in light of the fact that mass migrations to industrial countries only began in the 1970s. Tongans have been migrating in the past few decades for a host of different reasons, which have gradually changed over time (Cowling 1990, Gailey 1992, Lee 2003, Small 1997). The principal reasons for moving overseas are associated, in one fashion or another, with the lack of locally based opportunity for socio-economic mobility. The generally stagnant national economy is based on agricultural exports and a fledgling tourism industry, but its corner-posts are foreign aid and remittances from migrants.² Every family has at least one close member in temporary or permanent residence overseas, and relies on remittances from overseas-based relatives for its material survival. Transnationalism and diasporic dispersal have affected every aspect of life in the islands.

As in other diasporic contexts, the flow of people is not unidirectional: diasporic Tongans travel to Tonga frequently, maintaining allegiances of all sorts in several countries at once. Parents send children back and forth between Tonga and industrial countries and from one diasporic enclave to another. An increasingly important flow of migrants, mostly of retirement age but also including some young overseas-born second-generation Tongans, return to Tonga to live more or less permanently (Francis 2003). Other significant groups of recent migrants to Tonga are people from China who have been migrating since the early 1990s, some of whom benefited from a passport-sale scam operated by some of the most prominent persons in the country, until public outcry put an end to it. Chinese immigrants operate small- and medium-size businesses and are the target of significant popular resentment for a number of reasons, including explicit racism. Lastly, a small number of Australians, New Zealanders, Europeans, and U.S. nationals ("Expats") are employed in Tonga on a temporary basis by the government, the foreign aid infrastructure, and larger businesses.

Tonga has never experienced large-scale immigration from colonial centers, although a small number of Chinese and Fiji Indians settled there in the early part of the 20th century, and many elite families count among their ancestors a handful of 19th century German and British settlers.

Tongan society is highly stratified. At the apex of its pyramidal social structure is the monarch, whose wide-ranging authority is supported by an aristocracy that bases its power on the control of both local resources (e.g., land) and resources associated with modernity and links to the industrial world (e.g., business ventures). State and society rest on a marriage between selected aspects of a purported tradition and selected aspects of modernity. For example, the State is “the only remaining Polynesian kingdom” (as it frequently describes itself) and an upholder of Christianity, features that Tongans consider to be illustrative of long-standing if not timeless tradition, while also emphasizing the fact that Tonga is an economically forward-looking entity. Tongans often talk about the convergence of selected tradition and selected modernity as *anga fakā-Tonga* “the Tongan way,” the nature of which is a topic of some anxiety in the face of rapid socio-cultural change and the challenges it poses to an earlier order. In addition, modernity and the new forms of power that it has engendered have facilitated the emergence of a new middle class that includes successful entrepreneurs and government officials, defined in part by the transnational resources of its members, some of whom challenge the rank-based hierarchy in a more or less open fashion.³

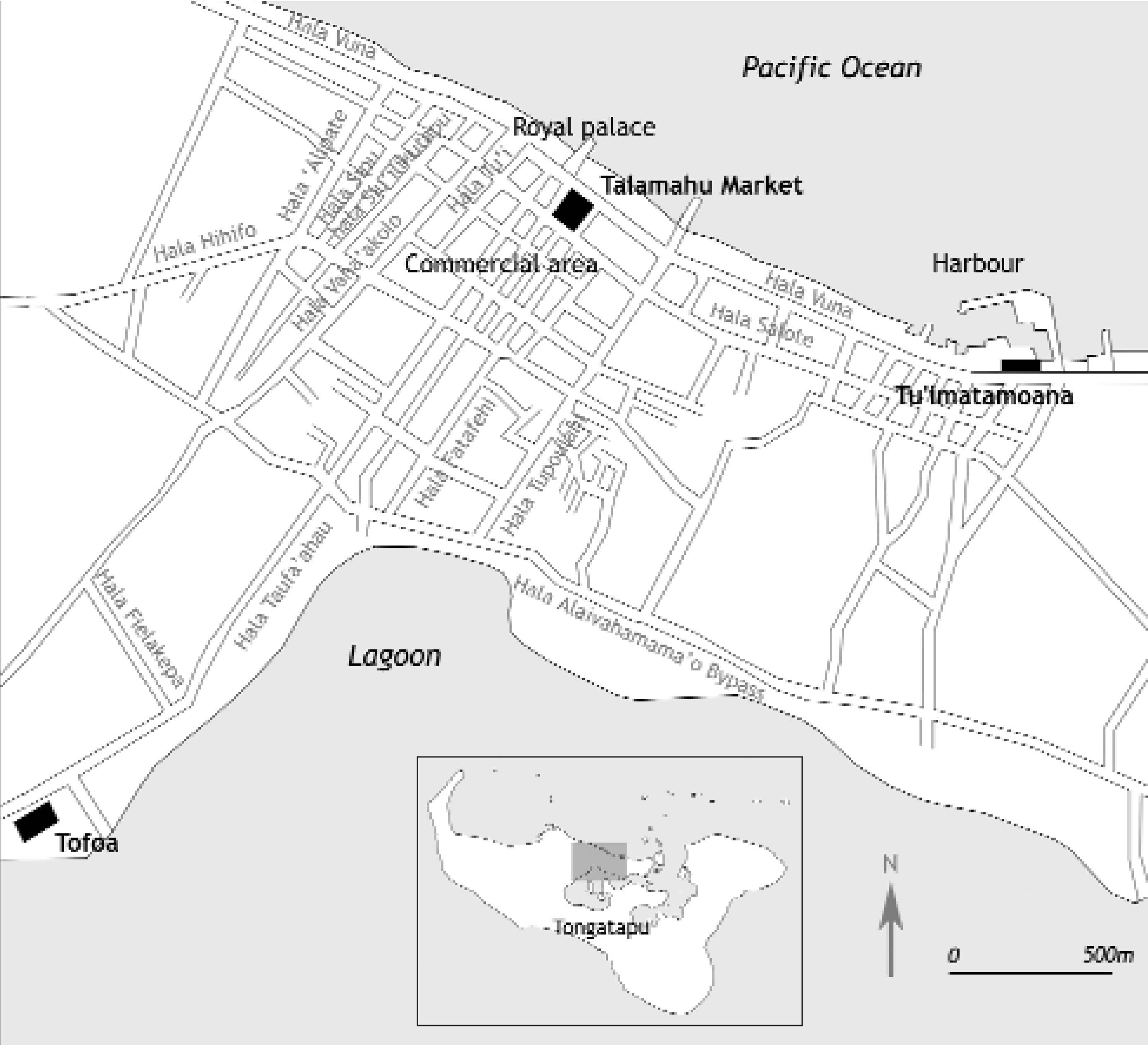
While rank is constantly foregrounded, it is also fragile, and this fragility affects every social situation, public and private. The resulting anxiety is operationalized through a constant concern about decorum and face, the loss of which brings *mā* “shame” onto oneself and devalues one’s often contested claims to being worthy of one’s rank or better. An important prestige-manipulation tool in this cutthroat environment is the ability to appropriate for oneself material and symbolic tokens of the industrial world, in a pattern that resonates with dynamics encountered in many locations of the world periphery (e.g., Friedman 1994, Leichty 2003). Being at home with the practicalities of cosmopolitan life, having a large network of relatives in key overseas locations, and showing confidence in one’s ability to speak English are some of the many ways in which the high-ranking and the wealthy assert their superiority over commoners, the poor, and the poorly connected. Most basically, at a time when first-world immigration authorities are increasingly criminalizing transnational movement, particularly poor people’s migration from the periphery to the industrial centers, the ability to secure visas and travel funds has become an important marker of status. Some elite individuals have acquired

for themselves and their families permanent resident status in Australia, New Zealand, or the United States, and commute between Tonga and these countries, while poorer Tongans must levy, in order to travel, the substantial monetary bonds against their safe return to Tonga now required by the immigration authorities of industrial countries.⁴

Another avenue to socio-economic mobility is provided by the diversity of Christian denominations represented in the society, in which almost everyone is at least nominally Christian. For example, the socially dominant Methodist-derived churches, particularly the state denomination, the Free Wesleyan Church, offers its adherents the possibility of upward mobility through mainstream means and local contexts. Agents may seek to improve their lot by becoming pillars of the church, or by switching religious affiliation to align themselves with more advantageous milieus (Decktor Korn 1978). Less mainstream churches offer different kinds of possibilities, which attract Tongans who are dissatisfied with the burdens of tradition, particularly the competitive and often crippling gift giving to mainstream denominations.⁵ “Fringe” denominations with little official recognition include born-again Christian groups, Pentecostals, and Evangelical Catholics. They attract a variety of already marginal Tongans, and challenge in serious ways the basic premises upon which the Tongan social order is founded. Navigating the waters between the fringe and the establishment are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, or Mormonism), a denomination that stands out for its openness to the outside world and rapid growth. Enthusiastic conversion to LDS membership stems from a number of features that some find attractive in the church, including its doctrinal embracement of capitalist accumulation and free agency (Mitchell 2001). The LDS Church has eliminated competitive gift-giving to the church and replaced it with fixed-rate tithing, which is considerably less burdensome and facilitates accumulation. However, Mormons continue to be stigmatized as local “others” for the challenges that LDS doctrines and practices pose to the traditional order, despite the Church’s efforts to tone down these challenges (Gordon 1990).

The Tu’imatamoana *Fea*

It is in a context of increasing socio-cultural indeterminacy and complexity that the *fea* operates as the largest non-produce marketplace in the country, on a temporary site on the fringe of town called Tu’imatamoana (see Map 1). Speakers of English would probably describe the *fea* as a flea market (or “swap meet” or “car-boot sale”), as many of its features are reminiscent of these and comparable ven-



MAP 1: Location of Nuku'alofa Markets

(Based on a map provided courtesy of Vava'u Press)

ues in industrialized countries (Gregson and Crewe 2003, Herrmann 1997, Maisel 1974, Miller 1988). It offers second-hand goods of many different sorts, alongside some new goods, to potential customers who make participating in the *fea* a Saturday morning's outing project in the company of relatives or friends, in which sociality figures as prominently as purchasing. At the time of fieldwork, trading was active from dawn till early afternoon every Saturday of the year, and its operation on the day before the Sabbath is congruent with the local definition of Saturday as a day of preparation for consumption. It is on Saturday, for example, that villagers go to the gardens, prepare food, and tidy up house compounds in preparation for the Sabbath, a day of rest, worship, and quiet sociability.⁶

Tongans refer to several other sites of commerce as *fea*. One is the upstairs level of the main produce marketplace in town, the Talamahu Market (see Map 1), where sellers set up stalls with varying degrees of permanence and offer a range of merchandise identical to that of the Saturday *fea*. The most notable difference between Tu'imatamoana and the upstairs *fea* at Talamahu Market is the fact that the latter operates on the same schedule as the produce marketplace, i.e., from early morning till late afternoon on weekdays. Also called *fea* are makeshift and temporary roadside stalls set up on the side of the road in front of homes and businesses, operated independently by sellers with goods to sell, which appear and disappear in rapid succession around Nuku'alofa and the island of Tongatapu. In Neiafu, the main village of the Vava'u group in the north of Tonga, a smaller second-hand marketplace resembles the Nuku'alofa *fea*. I conducted some fieldwork at Talamahu Market and at makeshift *fea* around Tongatapu, although the focus of my fieldwork was on the Saturday *fea*.

Historical details about the *fea* are difficult to uncover, in part because, like other "informal" economic activities, second-hand trading was not the subject of a trail of paperwork until its importance could no longer go unnoticed. In the 1980s, stalls selling non-produce items, principally second-hand clothing, began cropping up among the produce stalls at the Talamahu Market. Previously, the only source of clothing were shops, where only new items were sold, and the only items available in the marketplace, and in limited quantities until recently, were produce. By 1990, their number had reached a critical mass, and Market Authorities corralled them together in a temporary adjacent location. In 1995, the government built a new marketplace, and during the construction period everyone moved to Tu'imatamoana, on land owned by the Tonga Port Authorities. The new two-story marketplace in the centre of town was designed to house produce stalls downstairs and handicraft stalls upstairs. However, handicraft sellers were not numerous enough, and the goods sold upstairs soon diversified to include second-hand goods. Most *fea* stalls stayed at the Tu'imatamoana site, which continues to be viewed as temporary despite its longevity. During fieldwork, an additional marketplace was set up at Tofoa, in the southern part of town (see Map 1), which is fast becoming a second focus of Saturday-morning shopping, complete with bingo games held under yet-unoccupied awnings. Plans are to extend trading hours at Tofoa well beyond the Saturday-morning-only scheme followed at Tu'imatamoana, despite vigorous opposition from the Tonga Chamber of Commerce, which echoes comparable struggles the pitch informal economic activities against institutional authority in many other parts of the world (Gregson and Crewe 2003:25-33, Stoller 2002).



FIGURE 1: The back of the Tu'imatamoana market, facing the waterfront.

Stalls at the Tu'imatamoana *fea* form three to four rows, stretching lengthwise between the water and one of Nuku'alofa's main roads, each approximately 2.5m wide and 2m deep, sheltered by flimsy makeshift corrugated-iron roofing held by recycled timber or metal posts, and separated by narrow aisles (Figure 1). Sellers can be anyone able to pay the rental fee of T\$5 per market day per stall, a fee that an employee of the Market Authorities comes to collect during the day.⁷ Sellers usually cover the muddy or dusty ground with tarpaulin sheets or rough mats on which they spread their wares, while more resourceful traders also set up folding tables, folding chairs, and coolers, giving their stall a more sophisticated look than those run with fewer means or less commercial flair. Customers approach the stalls from either side, unless the vendor has specifically blocked one side to give his or her stall a front and back, to conform to normatively Tongan spatial organization. Vendors commonly volunteer with little prompting the price of particular objects to customers who express an interest, but no bargaining and hawking take place, in sharp contrast to other marketplaces around the world (compare Bauman 2001, Kapchan 1996, Lindenfeld 1990). Bargaining is shameful *fakamā* for all involved, and customers who try to bargain are not appreciated; such is the case of Chinese customers, and this propensity generates one item in a long list of Tongan grievances against the Chinese.

I engaged in sustained observation of *fea* activities on many Saturdays during fieldwork, listened to sellers and shoppers interact, conversed with them and with market officials, businesspersons, and shopkeepers in Nuku'alofa. I also administered a questionnaire-based survey of 30 stall-keepers on one Saturday in September 2000, to which I will refer below as “the survey.” My fieldwork methods were more constrained at the *fea* than in other settings in Tonga, in that participants were not always pleased about being “investigated.” For example, several people turned down my requests to photograph or interview them, and I did not feel comfortable videotaping interaction at the *fea*. These responses are significant for my analysis of what the *fea* represents to its participants, as I will elaborate presently.

The ethnography that follows focuses first on objects, then on sellers, and finally on customers. My focus is not just on the exchange activities (i.e., the exchange of goods for money), but on the context of these activities: the interactions among objects, sellers, and customers, the behind-the-scenes interactions between sellers and suppliers, and the differences between social action at the *fea* and social, economic, and symbolic dynamics at play in greater Tongan society.

Objects

Fea sellers offer a very wide variety of goods for sale. The most prevalent are used clothes and shoes; household items, including tableware and cleaning products; cosmetics and other personal care items, principally shampoo, cologne, and hairclips; and food, such as root crops, cakes, and bundles of taro leaves (*lū*). Also on offer are pens, sealing tape, ribbons, colored wool, jewels, rubbish bags, water bottles, wigs, gloves, stereos, tires, typewriters, fishing gear, plumbing tools and parts, electrical appliances, plastic flowers, tapa cloth, mats, coconut-fiber sennit (rope), and quilts. Table 1 inventories six typical stalls at the start of a trading day, providing a glimpse of the variety and typical volume of the merchandise that each stall offers, of the variety of the merchandise across and among stalls, and of the range of inventories represented, from clearly specialized inventories to eclectic ones. Interspersed among the stalls offering durable objects are tables selling cooked food like barbecued chicken and sausages, emulating small barbecue business ventures that have emerged all over Tonga in the last few years, and coolers offering drinking coconuts and sodas.

Presentation styles vary considerably, from piles of unsorted and unfolded clothes to carefully arranged displays, with objects organized in categories as in a shop (Figures 2 and 3). The care with which goods are displayed reflects the

TABLE 1: Inventories of representative stalls, Tu'imatamoana Fair, 14 October 2000 (Stalls 1-4) and 21 October 2000 (Stalls 5-6)

STALL 1

5 pairs men's long pants
5 dresses
15 tops
2 T-shirts
18 skirts
4 pairs shorts

STALL 2

7 shirts
12 T-shirts
1 leather jacket
19 hair-bands
2 towels
4 children's dresses
7 skirts
1 set fake fingernails
4 key rings
12 pairs ladies' shoes
4 packets lollies
1 doll

STALL 3

20 packets noodles
2 hair clippers
3 Gameboys
3 boxes washing powder
2 pillows
52 pairs gloves
11 shirts
16 dresses
14 skirts
6 ladies' tops
10 pairs ladies' underpants
10 bras
15 baby winter suits
7 baby dresses
15 cans soft drinks

STALL 4

6 hammers
4 hammer sets
12 screwdriver sets
1 14-piece wrench set
3 hair clippers
1 adjustable wrench set
2 4-piece chisel sets
1 grinder
3 tire pumps
6 tape measures
1 roll sealing tape
1 manual drill
1 electric drill
2 pairs goggles
4 pairs boxing gloves
2 10-piece lock sets
2 carpenter tool bags
5 levels
3 5-piece plier sets
2 handsaws
2 hacksaws
3 crowbars
4 trowels
3 pairs scissors
2 wire cutters
1 25-piece hex set
1 8-piece hex set

STALL 5

12 pairs long pants
10 pairs shorts
4 T-shirts
2 dish racks
3 outdoor baskets
4 hot-water bottles
4 medium washing tins
5 large washing tins
4 pairs tongs
5 pairs sandals
14 packets 50-piece clothes pegs
4 large cooking spoons
4 small cooking spoons
8 cooking knives
10 mugs

6 small coffee cups
8 saucers
10 plastic cups
12 drinking glasses
4 ceramic bowls
6 plastic bowls
6 wine glasses
5 plastic jugs
4 glass jugs
8 trays
4 bath brushes
4 sets clothes hangers
5 plastic buckets
6 hand towels

STALL 6

15 pairs shorts
35 dresses
6 T-shirts
5 shirts
4 ladies' shoes
5 cooking spoons
2 bottles perfume
30 glass cups
4 plastic jugs
5 pillows
15 ceramic saucers
15 plastic saucers
1 plastic tin
5 toys
8 packets drinking straws
8 children's T-shirts
40 meters material
4 cooking knives
2 glass bowls
4 rolls sticky tape
15 green coconuts
10 cobs cooked corn
10 watermelons

experience of the seller: “regulars” who see the *fea* as a major source of income and selling as an important part of their week have had the opportunity to fine-tune their window-dressing skills, and strategize their displays self-consciously, visually foregrounding trinkets (e.g., toys, bubble-bath kits) that will attract customers but are not necessarily profitable, or foregrounding fashion styles favored by the markets they try to target (e.g., young women, parents, elderly ladies). Seasoned stall-keepers tell me that they can never keep up with the demand for certain items, no matter the cost, such as fashionable black track-pants and sports shirts, hip-hop-inspired jeans and jerseys, baby clothes, warm clothing in winter, and large-size black dresses.⁸

Overwhelmingly, stall-keepers at the *fea* obtain merchandise from relatives in residence overseas. 90% of respondents in the survey identified relatives as the origin of at least some of their merchandise. Shoppers come to the *fea* with the explicitly articulated expectation that they will be able to buy imported merchandise. These goods, according to both sellers and customers, are not available elsewhere in Tonga, or they are available in shops but at inflated prices and lower quality. Most goods are brought from the Continental United States and Hawai'i (60% of the stall-keepers in the survey identified their merchandise as primarily of American provenance), reflecting both the residence of sellers' relatives and the fact that many shoppers view American goods as particularly desirable. Other goods come from New Zealand (40%) and Australia (13%). The total of percentages cited exceeds 100% because an appreciable number of stalls surveyed (23%) offered goods from several different countries, indicating that sellers extract merchandise from multiple networks.

Since Tongans began migrating in large numbers in the 1970s, monetary remittances have been one of the main methods through which diasporic families have maintained their kinship cohesion.⁹ However, since the 1980s, diasporic Tongans have gradually supplemented or sometimes replaced monetary remittances to their relatives with shipments of merchandise to be sold in Tonga. Kinship categories that survey respondents mentioned most frequently as a main source of goods were women's sisters (9 out of 30) and women's brothers (7). The prominence of the former reflects expectations of mutual care (*fe'ofa'ofa'aki*) between sisters, while the prominence of the latter is a reflection of brothers' normative lower rank and consequent non-reciprocal obligations to their sisters, characteristics that are foundational to the Tongan social order (Gailey 1987, Ortner 1981, Rogers 1977). Gifts of marketable goods are part of often long-term and large-scale systems of delayed reciprocity. 63% of survey respondents indicated that, in return for merchandise, they sent to



FIGURE 2: Stall at Tu'matamoana offering second-hand clothing, potted plants, and instant noodles.

their relatives *koloa faka-Tonga* “Tongan valuables,” mats of quality and yardages of tapa-cloth made from the bark of the paper mulberry as well as, increasingly, quilts (Addo 2003), all of which are the focus of prestation performances on ceremonial occasions (funerals, weddings, annual church conferences) and are in specially great demand in overseas Tongan communities (James 1997). Some respondents also send their overseas-based relatives coolers of fish and lobsters or cartons of cooked taro and yams. The goods offered for sale are thus part of a larger system of exchange that bind relatives together over large distances, and maintain the social integrity of Tongan society despite diasporic fragmentation. Furthermore, as the goods have a complex career, from commodities to gifts to commodities, they illustrate the complex interplay between both kinds of exchange (Appadurai 1986:16, Carrier 1995).

Overseas Tongans obtain merchandise in a variety of ways. They buy many items, particularly second-hand clothes, at flea markets, garage sales, Salvation Army shops, and discount stores. Those with time on their hands strategize purchases, looking out for sales in newspapers, or combing opportunity racks for end-of-season bargains. They project what will sell well in Tonga, exercising com-



FIGURE 3: One of the “regulars” at Tu’imatamoana, specializing in electric goods.

plex consumer-imagination skills. One survey respondent explained that her brother worked for an insurance company in New Zealand, which gave him the opportunity to purchase at low cost the content of fire-damaged homes, the salvageable portion of which he sends to his sister. In a minority of cases, the merchandise on display is the result of calculated entrepreneurial activity, as I will illustrate in the next section. A small but conspicuous number of stalls sell merchandise that clearly “fell off the back of a truck” into the hands of Tongan employees of manufacturing companies in the industrial West. For example, for several weeks in the middle of 2000, until stock ran out, a stall was offering a diverse line of cosmetics from a fashionable transnational manufacturer at a fraction of what they normally cost. The otherwise very forthcoming stall-keepers answered questions about the origin of the goods with notable evasiveness.

Overseas Tongans send the merchandise through a variety of means, including sea or air cargo. Some bring the goods as excess personal luggage when they travel back to Tonga. Recipients generally manage to evade import duties, for example by clearing their goods during the work shift of a relative employed by the Department of Customs, who will come away from the transaction with a fashionable pair of jeans or two. A minority of entrepreneurial sellers obtain their goods on their own, benefiting from various factors such as the ability to travel overseas at relatively low cost thanks to a close kin who is

employed by an airline company, or as part of a larger panorama of import-export ventures, as I will illustrate in the next section.

The characterization of *fea* merchandise as imports must be mitigated in several ways. First, a small proportion of goods offered for sale are quintessentially local. Such is the case of the produce that some stalls display, bundles of taro leaves being the most frequent. Such is also the case of *koloa faka-Tonga*, which is now also deeply embedded in the monetized sphere of the economy, both locally and transnationally. Their appearance at the *fea* bears witness to the extent to which gift and commodity exchanges are intertwined in Tongan society.^x Other items, such as cakes, are locally manufactured with imported ingredients (e.g., flour and sugar). Handicrafts and souvenirs, offered as Tongan products to tourists and Expats, may or may not be manufactured locally; one prominent dealer occasionally sells large wooden bowls used to mix kava (a mildly narcotic drink consumed socially and ceremonially), which he imports from Fiji, as there are very few kava-bowl carvers left in Tonga.

More dramatically, objects with local attachments of one type or other are often the product of multi-sited manufacture, adding further complexity to the simple characterization of the offerings of the *fea* as either local or imported. One stall, for example, offers cotton t-shirts with a large screen-print of Tonga's national seal, a striking symbol in widespread use. The stall-keepers identified the t-shirts, of interest to both Tongan and overseas customers, as "American" (although the manufacturer's label specified the usual range of origins, from Indonesia to Mexico), and stated that relatives in Hawai'i screen-printed them from a stencil the sellers had made in Tonga. Another seller has an aunt in California who is a skilful maker of sennit (*kafa*). The stall-keeper extracts raw fiber from the husk of aged coconuts (*pulu*), boils it to satisfy U.S. agricultural regulations, and sends it to her aunt in California, who returns the plaited sennit for sale in Tonga. Yet another stall attracted much attention in early September: displayed for sale were several *kiekie*, or women's formal girdles worn over dresses (Addo 2003), intricately crafted in this case with lace, sequins, and imitation pearls, designed to be worn during the *Sepitema*, or annual festival held by the various Christian denominations in September during which women of the congregation offer money and other valuables to the pastor. These particular girdles had been manufactured in Lā'ie, Hawai'i, by Mormon relatives of the seller (ironically, the LDS Church is the only denomination that does not hold a *Sepitema*).

These examples illustrate two notable points. First, objects commodified or re-commodified at the Nuku'alofa *fea* have already acquired a complex history before they appear under the makeshift awnings of the marketplace, and this history

is embedded in what constitutes them as objects offered for sale (compare Hansen 2000 on the Lusaka second-hand clothing market). In this respect, of course, they do not differ from many other types of objects in every society (Appadurai 1986). Second, the constitutive history of objects embodies narratives of Tongan transnationalism and diasporic dispersal. No longer can “local” objects, such as coconut-fiber sennit, t-shirts emblazoned with symbols of the Tongan nation-state, and women’s church festival girdles ever be assumed to be “local” in any straightforward sense, i.e., assumed to be made in Tonga from Tongan raw materials by Tongan hands. No longer can the flow of goods be assumed to be unidirectional, with “foreign” goods from the islands traveling from the islands to overseas Tongan communities and “local” Tongan goods following a reverse trail.¹¹

Sellers

It is usually the owners of the merchandise that operate *fea* stalls, although relatives and friends often keep them company for the day, and help out with transportation and sales.¹² Sellers uniformly report that they come to the *fea* primarily to make money. However, they also state that their commercial successes are uneven. Sales volume is seasonal (Christmastime being high season), but it also differs greatly from stall to stall. The average gross income among the 25 sellers in the survey who reported being at the *fea* in the prior week averages T\$119, with a T\$8–300 range (s.d.=82). The financial success of sellers is appreciable, since the average weekly sales figure corresponds to a very comfortable weekly salary in Tonga, but it is also highly variable.¹³

Sellers come from diverse backgrounds, but also present some unifying characteristics. Both their diversity and commonality are best illustrated through a few portraits. Seini, who prefers to be called “Jane” (of which “Seini” is the Tongan-language equivalent), is a 45-year-old resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, where she holds a good professional job, and a member of the LDS Church.¹⁴ She comes to Tonga twice a year to visit her elderly parents and seventeen-year-old first-born daughter. She also timed the visit during which our interview took place to enable her to attend her high-school reunion. Born in Tonga and speaking both English and Tongan with ease, her presentation of self is unmistakably that of an overseas-based Tonga: clad in a fashionable rugby shirt and a visor that declares “Fiji,” she is forthcoming and gregarious in an inimitable California style. All of her siblings except one have married foreigners. She speaks of the difficulties of flying from San Francisco to Tonga on the limited annual leave available to her, which she manages to extend by swapping

duties with colleagues, and self-assuredly compares various airlines and routes (via Honolulu vs. Nadi vs. Auckland) for convenience, frequency, fares, and cost of excess baggage. The latter is important: in order to finance her trips to Tonga, she brings the goods she has accumulated in California throughout the year as part of her luggage, paying excess-baggage charges. Jane is a good example of temporary overseas-based *fea* stall-keepers: she radiates an air of cosmopolitanism and is at ease with a multi-sited lifestyle, embodying the “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1993) of the typical diasporic subject.

‘Ofa, in her 50s, is also a Mormon. She “commutes” between Tonga and Inglewood in Southern California (a city with a large Pacific Islander population), spending several months at a time in each location. Her husband and children are all in the United States, and she returns to Tonga to take care of her own family, particularly her elderly parents, but also for the explicit purpose of reselling goods she acquires overseas.¹⁵ Like Jane, she transports her merchandise in her luggage, but unlike Jane, her commercial activities at both Tu’imatamoana and Talamahu are ongoing, large-scale, and the result of careful business strategizing (when she is in the United States, she leaves her permanent stall at Talamahu in the care of a relative). One of the pioneers in the traffic in consumer goods, ‘Ofa is an astute saleswoman, but she speaks longingly of the days when fewer people engaged in the trade and when sales were consequently brisker and resale prices higher (*kuo holo e fea*, “the fair is not what it used to be”). Less cosmopolitan in demeanor than Jane, ‘Ofa nevertheless represents another type of transnational Tongan, whose life is materially grounded equally in Tonga and California, and for whom the *fea* has become a goal in itself, rather than an instrumental activity to finance airfares.

Sellers who engage in sometimes complex commercial operations, like ‘Ofa, form a small but notable minority. Their commercial strategies vary widely, as well as the relative importance of selling at the *fea* in the range of their commercial activities. For example, Pita, a member of the mainstream Church of Tonga, buys new shoes from a wholesaler in China, with whom he corresponds with the help of his *Pālangi* (“Westerner”) son-in-law, and sells them for an appreciable profit to supplement his earnings as a taxi driver. In some cases, the *fea* stall is only one of many aspects of an entrepreneur’s range of commercial activities. The case of Viliami, a “fallen” Mormon and visible small-scale entrepreneur, is a particularly informative one. His stall at the *fea*, to which he attends personally on a sporadic basis, offers different types of goods at different times, depending on his international travel itinerary. He often travels to Fiji and Hawai’i with handicrafts for the substantial tourist markets (tapa-cloth and mat

products, wood carvings, bone jewelry), touting them at destination as either local or “Polynesian” objects, and returns to Tonga with t-shirts and other items of clothing that appeal to both Tongan audiences and the fledgling tourist market. His home is crammed with handicraft raw materials, *koloa faka-Tonga*, and consumer goods, and doubles as a sweatshop in which half a dozen young female employees make and decorate tapa-cloth, which they then cut up into small pieces to be packaged as tablemats and coasters. I would later encounter these objects for sale in the gift shop of the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka, Japan, signed in the back by Viliami, “Polynesian artist,” regardless of the fact that the tapa-cloth manufacture is the exclusive domain of women.

‘Eseta illustrates the case of stall-keepers who utilize both kinship and friendship ties to obtain goods. A member of a small born-again Christian group with strong overseas ties, which includes several American missionaries based in Tonga, ‘Eseta, in her 30s, has resided in a Western country in the past but does not travel much now. Like many other sellers, she specializes in second-hand clothing. She receives most of the clothes as non-monetary remittances from overseas-based relatives and as gifts from fellow church members. She and her children wear some for a while before re-selling them at the *fea*. She enjoys selling, which she does with a pleasant and unassuming demeanor, and finds her commercial activities a convenient way of making a living, as it does not tie her to a specific schedule and allows her to attend to family or church activities when needed, echoing a theme that many other sellers articulate.

The sociological makeup of participants in the *fea* calls for several generalizations. The first is the predominance of women, which is also true of customers. In this respect, the *fea* conforms to cross-culturally well-attested patterns that define marketplaces as one of the few sites of the public and economic sphere open to and dominated by women. Some of the factors that have been proposed elsewhere to explain the gendering of marketplaces apply here, while others do not. For example, here as elsewhere, marketplace trading often provides a flexibility not offered by other economic activities, thus allowing women to attend to family, church, and other demands (Seligmann 2001). In many other societies characterized by intensive labor emigration, women are often left behind while men migrate, and seek out economic, social, and symbolic resources in marketplaces. However, in Tonga, migration affects both genders equally, and while women come to the *fea* to convert non-monetary gifts from siblings into cash, these gifts originate equally from sisters and brothers, as I illustrated in the previous section (and only marginally from husbands). Thus the Nuku’alofa *fea* is not the product of gendered demographics or exchange patterns in any simple way. More sug-

gestive is the cross-culturally common association of women with consumption practices and ideologies. Witness for example the way in which women in the post-industrial world have appropriated, with the active encouragement of consumer society, the image of the consuming self more readily than men, having been excluded from cultivating self-worth through wage employment. As I will demonstrate presently, many women at the *fea* define themselves as modern persons, in reference to a modernity that embraces consumption as one of its defining cornerstones, an embracement that may be operationalized through either the role of seller (i.e., agent of others' consumption) or customer (i.e., consuming self). The symbolic association of women with consumption, mediated by modernity, is a useful way of understanding the predominance of women at the *fea* in Tonga.¹⁶

The second important remark is the over-representation at the *fea* of fringe sociological categories. In Tonga, church affiliation is a significant index of many other aspects of identity. The most mainstream religiously defined category of local others is the LDS Church, whose adherents comprised 14% of the population at the last national census (2000). The survey of 30 *fea* sellers identified over twice that percentage at the *fea*. Evangelical Catholics, born-again Christians, and members of other fringe religious groups are also over-represented compared to other contexts. Miscellaneous forms of social liminality that are prominent at the *fea* but are not symbolized by a particular religious affiliation include small-scale entrepreneurs, who often express impatience with forms of prestation and exchange that are branded as "traditional." Viliami, for example, is an unusual individual in Tonga for being in his 40s and unmarried; he explains that marrying is too onerous, because a wife's relatives are a financial burden on a relatively successful husband. (He does have a live-in girlfriend, or *faka-Suva*, but because the relationship is not sanctioned by church and state it does not place him under any material obligation to her family.) This kind of stance constructs an image of a "traditional" order that showcases its burdensome and constraining qualities, and sidelines positive features like reciprocity and sociality. Similarly, sellers often distance themselves, in one way or another, from the negative connotations that many Tongans still attach to selling goods, particularly used items. Not long ago, selling used items was widely stigmatized as a sign that one was so poor or poorly connected that one had to sell one's belongings to survive, and was seen as a problematic cause of *mā* "shame" (cf. van der Grijp 2002). As I will illustrate later, many sellers have decided that they are immune to this potential shame, and thus place themselves on the margin of structures of emotion that permeate "traditional" life, at the same time risking criticism and marginalization for lacking in decorum and dignity (compare Rasmussen 2003:13 on Tuareg transnational artisans).



FIGURE 4: “Big ticket” items displayed at a stall run by Chinese immigrants.

At the far end of the spectrum of Otherness among *fea* sellers figure recent Chinese immigrants, some of whom also own small shops in town. Their stalls are larger, better organized, and more specialized than the average Tongan stall, indexing the explicitly entrepreneurial designs that background their presence at the *fea* (Figure 4). The overall sociological composition of sellers therefore imbue the *fea* with an otherness and marginality that I will elaborate when I describe the social practices that take place at the *fea*.

Fea sellers contrast in a number of ways with shopkeepers trading in the center of town. With the exception of the Chinese traders, there is no overlap between the two groups; one shopkeeper asserted that, if he were to set up a stall at the *fea*, fellow shopkeepers would ostracize him. Shopkeepers operate a number of permanent commercial establishments in Nuku'alofa, from small concrete and corrugated iron shops by the roadside that sell basic foodstuff, cigarettes, soap, and kerosene (and increasingly operated by Chinese immigrants) to large general stores selling a wider variety of food and non-consumables, some specializing in hardware, baked goods, or clothing. A small minority runs shops that offer goods (e.g., hand-painted t-shirts, golf and tennis equipment, coveted hip-hop fashion) to tourists, visiting overseas Tongans, and members of

the elite, but at prices well beyond the reach of average citizens, whose tastes the goods do not necessarily cater to anyway. The more prominent shopkeepers share one characteristic with the *fea* sellers, namely the fact that they are also predominantly local others: part-European descendants of nineteenth-century German traders, long-term Fiji Indian or Chinese immigrants, Tongan returned migrants, established Tongan entrepreneurs with important commercial interests, and LDS Church adherents. However, their otherness is considerably more mainstream and privileged than that of *fea* sellers: many shopkeepers are part of elite circles, as attested by their membership in the Chamber of Commerce, for example. Shopkeepers see *fea* traders as threatening not just their commercial interests but also their status as privileged if marginal members of the Tongan establishment.

Customers

Everyone in Tonga shops at the *fea*, from the occasional member of the royal family to the low-ranking, from wealthy persons to the indigent, from urban sophisticates to villagers, from locally-grounded people to returned migrants, tourists, and Expats. Because the *fea* offers something of interest to everyone, from hip-hop fashion for male teenagers to large-size mourning clothes for elderly women, shopping at the *fea* is the great social leveler of Tongan society. “Join the crowds on the waterfront, and find everything you need,” encourages a tourist-oriented map of Nuku’alofa. The *fea* is perhaps one of the few contexts in which Tongans of all social standings rub shoulders with tourists and Expats. “There is nothing like this in New Zealand,” affirmed a Kiwi contract-worker couple, shopping for clothing to send to their children at boarding school in their home country.

Many customers do not come to the *fea* to buy anything specific. They characterize their trips to the *fea* as an outing (*eva*) with their spouse or family, during which they know they are likely to run into friends and relatives. Time spent at the *fea* is “free time,” and since this free time is occupied by consumption practices, it embeds customers into a modern lifestyle in which consumption is easily transformed into pleasure and vice-versa (Appadurai 1996:79-83). Customers do not seek to cultivate the kinds of long-term trading partnerships that are so consequential in markets in other parts of the world (Plattner 1989:210-4), although both groups view socialization over a transaction as an important component of what the *fea* is for. What they see in the *fea* is a place to practice consumption: browse (*siosio pē*), hunt for bargains, compare, and rummage

through knick-knacks. Here is how a young professional woman, a returned migrant monolingual in English, characterizes her attraction to the *fea*:¹⁷

Customer: I love- I come here every Saturday.

NB: Every Saturday.

Customer: I love coming here. Hmm-hm!

NB: And uh- wha- describe uh what you do here and why you d- why you come here.

Customer: Uhm- (0.5) Hmm-hmm-hm! Uhm I come here every Saturday because uh- because there is no other- there is no shopping in Tonga. So uhm- come here and it's- it's not so much looking for new stuff it's looking for old second-hand stuff.

NB: Uh-uh,

Customer: Yeah.

NB: Such as?

Customer: Just- uh- you know, I co- I collect junk, so- yeah. Hahahah. So this is a great place to come and have a look, because there is so- you can just- sort through all the bits and pieces and find some really interesting stuff here. So-

[Tu'imatamoana disk 4, 2:00:13-00:44]

These activities differ from what normally takes place in shops in the center of town. For example, many smaller shops are physically designed to discourage browsing, displaying merchandise on shelves separated from the reach of customers by a counter and a small corridor for the shopkeeper. Even in larger shops with open stacks, browsing customers are not made to feel welcome, as security guards keep a close watch on movements and timings. Patrons are expected to know what they need, buy it, and leave, and trying on clothes is difficult in most shops but the most expensive. In other words, the acquisition of merchandise at the *fea* and in shops are radically divergent activities, and many shoppers talk about the *fea* as being the only place in Tonga where they can “shop,” i.e., practice what the self-as-consumer expects to perform: making consumption the central focus of its activities, sensually apprehending objects through touch, smell, and sight, and finding pleasure in desiring, imagining, and

acquiring. Furthermore, many shoppers I interviewed indicated that one of the main motivations for coming to the *fea* was to see and buy imported goods otherwise not available or affordable. For these shoppers, the *fea* offers goods that enable them, through browsing and acquiring, to maintain a link with a desirable world that transcends the boundaries of the local context. The *fea* thus emerges as a key meeting point between the local and the non-local.

Practicing Modernity

These remarks indicate that the *fea* represents for its participants a great deal more than the simple exchange of merchandise for money, but has a host of other meanings for everyone involved, meanings that its enormous popularity suggests as particularly desirable for a broad cross-section of the society. I approach the problem by analyzing a sample of interactional vignettes that are representative of the kind of social practices that participants engage in at the *fea*. I will argue that certain symbols operate at the *fea* and that, while these symbols are not unique to the *fea* in that they are also encountered elsewhere in Tongan society, their density and recurrent co-presence is. It is through their repeated co-occurrence that the *fea* acquires its particular social meaning.

In addition to interacting with objects, *fea* participants interact with one another, and interviewees emphasize the importance of pleasantness and sociability in what attracts them to the *fea*. Customers and sellers perform this sociability, for example, by focusing on the objects on display and engaging in detailed talk about fashion, as in the following brief conversation between two acquaintances:

- Seller:** *Sai ia kia koe, Sōnia.*
 “Looks good on you, Sōnia.”
- Customer:** Yeah- if it fits =
- Seller:** ((ignoring customer’s contingency)) = Ni::ce. (10.0)
 What size is it? (2.0)
- Customer:** Eight. (3.0)
- Seller:** Ohh. (4.0) Too small. (2.0)
 ‘*E hao ia ‘ia Mālia.* (2.0) ‘*la me’a.* (2.0)
 “It’ll fit Mālia. I mean, what’s-her-name.”
 It’s might fit you, cuz it looks big!

- Customer:** 'Io?
"Yes?"
- Seller:** Yeah! (2.0) The waist, look!
- Customer:** I know-
- Seller:** I think it's one of those one that it has to show the bellybutton.
- Customer:** No way!
- Seller:** Aaaha-ha-haa!
- Customer:** .Haa-ha-hah!
- Seller:** That's the in-thing in New Zealand now. Even my kids say, "Mummy, see, it has to show the b-!" Huh! I say, "No:::, no::!" Ahahahuh-hh! Cuz that's the look now!

[Tu'imatamoana, disk 1, 1:47:55-48:47]

This transcript offers a wealth of fascinating details about the ambience of the *fea*. The seller begins by presenting a "sales pitch" of a kind rarely heard at other commercial sites, and then seizes the opportunity to display her awareness of what's fashionable in New Zealand, and hence her worldliness. The shopper comments on the problematic implementation of the foreign style she describes, since leaving body parts like belly-buttons exposed would be considered highly indecorous in Tonga, despite the gradual trend to wear less among the cosmopolitan youth (Addo 2003, Helu 1999). The seller agrees, albeit in what appears to be a face-saving afterthought, and together they construct a body of worldly knowledge about fashion and practice their familiarity with the symbols constituting this knowledge, but also assert their agentive prerogative to decide on the local appropriateness of these symbols, carefully monitoring each other's moral evaluations. Later in the conversation, the seller goes further by ascribing to herself and her children an interaction that sounds distinctly modern in a Tongan context, one in which children negotiate parents' benign authority over how they should dress in a good-natured tone that emphasizes egalitarian relations. Both seller and customer emerge as modern and cosmopolitan agents, who nevertheless remain grounded in local norms of appropriateness. This focus on the local demonstrates that what the two women are constructing is indeed modernity, as opposed to, say, transnationalism, although this modernity is of course constructed through a keen cosmopolitan awareness of a global con-

text. Tongan women engage in similar talk in other venues, like the beauty parlor and the seamstress' studio (Besnier 1997), but the *fea* is probably the most prominent public context in which they negotiate this kind of knowledge and self-presentation. One certainly does not talk this way in shops in town.

Another notable feature of the transcript is language choice. Despite two instances of code-switching to Tongan, most of the interaction is in English, including the directly reported interaction between the mother and her children. Linked to the colonial past, English is the prestige language in Tonga, where it dominates contexts of employment, education, modernity, transnationalism, contacts with the external world, and new forms of socio-economic hegemony such as entrepreneurship. However, English “belongs” primarily to the elites, who are intimate with the privilege and cosmopolitanism that the language indexes. In contrast, most non-privileged Tongans are often reluctant to speak English ostensibly, according to explanations offered, because they fear making linguistic mistakes. In practice, their reluctance is not so much a matter of defective grammatical competence, but of not having the social self-assurance to assert oneself credibly as a privileged, modern, and cosmopolitan person without fearing shame (*mā*) and exposing oneself to ridicule (Besnier 2003).

However, in this interactional fragment, neither seller nor customer seems particularly concerned with these fears, even though the seller's English displays some of the features typical of broadly accented Pacific Island English (e.g., “*It's* might fit you”, “one of those *one* that *it* has to show”). These two women are far from unique in their choice of language; while conducting my Survey of stallkeepers, I encountered occasional difficulties filling out the questionnaire I had designed in Tongan when certain respondents insisted on speaking to me exclusively in English. Unlike most other contexts of Tongan social life, the *fea* is a context in which people who are primarily speakers of Tongan interact in English, thereby contributing to its saliently modern and cosmopolitan flavor.

Of additional interest in the conversation fragment is the fact that the seller not only speaks English, but also pronounces certain words with an exaggerated New Zealand accent (which I have not transcribed in the above). For example, she renders the first vowel sound of “Zealand” as the central vowel [ə] (schwa, i.e., the phonetic value of short unstressed vowels in standard English, such as the second vowel sound of “Zealand”). The phonetic centralization of certain vowels is a characteristic specific to New Zealand English (Bauer 1994), but it is principally the short lax vowel [ɪ] (as in “kid”) that can be rendered as such; the first long high tense vowel [i:] is only sometimes centralized in a word like “Zealand” in the speech of very “local” New Zealand speakers. The seller's lin-

guistic behavior is an example of what sociolinguists call “hypercorrection” (Labov 1966), which has long been documented in industrial societies as an index of a variety of inter-related socio-cultural attributes, including weak solidarity with members of one’s own social group and the yearning to be perceived as aligned with a social group that the speaker considers to be socially desirable.¹⁸ Through her exaggerated pronunciation, the seller communicates to others that she is familiar with the subtleties of New Zealand English and, by the same token, with all that the dialect stands for in Tonga, including a certain transnational sophistication and a familiarity with urban modernity. She also distances herself from Tongan-accented English (with some difficulty at the level of syntax) and all that it represents in the New Zealand context, including the stigma of being an underclass “Islander,” whose vowels are never centralized. Indirectly, she is also attempting to present herself not just as part of the context that stigmatizes accented English, but also as part of those who are not stigmatized.

Other *fea* participants express comparable desires to distance themselves from structures of emotions and social arrangements that are branded as “traditional” in other contexts. When I queried ‘Eseta, the mild-mannered born-again Christian seller I described earlier, about the shame of selling, she offered a fascinating explanation for why the fear of shame no longer encumbers her commercial activities:

Seller: In the past I was.

NB: Hm,

Seller: ‘Ē?
“You see?”

NB: Hm.

Seller: ‘Eku- ko e- ko e::: me’a lahi, me’a ‘oku to’o ai ‘a e- ‘a e- ‘a e maá ‘a ia ‘iate au ko e toki- break pē ia ‘i he- ‘i he f- aaa- ‘i he ala ‘a Sīsū ‘o fakatāu’atāina’i.

“It’s- the most important thing, thing that took away the- the shame from within me was just- what broke me away from- from- the- huh- [I went] the way through which Jesus sets us free.”

NB: Ha, ha.

Seller: Because I’m a born-again Christian.

NB: Hm, hm, hm, hm!

Seller: *Ko e me'a lahi 'eni ne f- ne- MOLE 'aupito 'a e maá.*
 “That’s the most important thing that f- that made
 shame DISAPPEAR once and for all.”

[Tu’imatamoana, disk 4, 5:25:43-26:13]

‘Eseta explicitly links her success as a *fea* seller with having accepted Jesus into her heart, which helped her overcome her initial feelings of shame. The social marginality that her religious affiliation entails has two effects: it disengages her from tradition-grounded emotional complexes (compare Meyer 1999), and it provides an enabling condition for her commercial ventures. One of the sellers’ portraits presented earlier provided a more strident example of the same dynamics, namely Viliami’s normatively unusual lack of interest in marriage, on account of the obligations that marriage imposes on a relatively well-off man. In all cases, sellers accomplish a number of social acts, which become related to one another in structures of congruence and opposition: they define themselves, albeit in different ways, as modern entities who are aware of a cosmopolitan world of possibilities beyond the strictures of locality and tradition; and they distance themselves, symbolically and materially, from social stances that mainstream Tongan society values, such as *fai fatongia* “performing the tasks [that society requires]” (e.g., giving to church and noble) and *fua kavenga* “bearing the burden [of traditional prestation]” (compare van der Grijp 2003). In a similar vein, another interviewee expresses her impatience with Tongans’ poverty by attributing it to their laziness:

Seller: The Tongan are lazy. I always say that, the Tongan are poor because they are lazy, no one should be poor here in Tonga. They should be all wealthy, but because they are lazy, they can’t even plant a taro. You know my home, I plant taro, I plant a- banana, I plant a *lesi* [i.e., papaya], everything I like, I plant. And now we eat it now. See, the people can’t seems to- I don’t know, it’s very hard to dig up something to plant something? Naah!

[Tu’imatamoana, disk 1, 1:25:30-26:01]

This kind of rationalization echoes colonial discourses of yesteryears as well as contemporary anti-immigrant reactionary discourses in countries like New Zealand, and is not uncommon in Tonga. But at the *fea* it acquires particular salience in conjunction with the modernity that participants construct,

a modernity that they contrast with a tradition defined by burdensome obligation and thwarted agency.

Finally, *fea* participants enact a self-consciousness about their position in a modern world that is more foregrounded here than in other contexts. I mentioned earlier some of the hurdles I encountered conducting fieldwork at the *fea*. Sellers and customers were reticent about being interviewed, photographed, and researched with a frequency that I have rarely encountered elsewhere in Tonga. I felt that videotaping, for example, fell outside the bounds of propriety. While many participants granted me permission to take photographs, a significant number turned down my requests, a rather unusual response in Tonga. One woman barbecuing chicken became very angry (in English) when I asked her (in Tongan) whether I could take her picture, possibly being well aware of the Western journalistic appetite for images of Tongans that perpetrate the puerilizing stereotype of a food-obsessed, obese, but quaint people. Tongans are anxious about decorum and face, but this concern in most contexts takes other Tongans as a primary frame of reference. It is only under specific circumstances that this frame of reference is extended to a broader modern world as represented by an inquisitive fieldworker or the possibility of having one's likeness portrayed and circulated in an unfavorable light, and the self-consciousness that many exhibit at the *fea* is congruent with the explicitly modern design of the setting.

The meaning of the *fea* resides at the convergence of a series of dynamics that operate simultaneously through the social practices and symbolic structures that permeate the setting. The *fea* is designed as a site of modernity, in which the consumption-oriented self is defined through the outside world and its material and symbolic resources, or at least the awareness of these resources and of their local relevance, and a self-consciousness of Tongans' role in the context of a larger world. Participants in the *fea* talk of tradition as more constraining than enabling, and position themselves in opposition to this traditional order, yet reserve the right to select the resources of modernity they wish to call their own. I am not claiming that the discourses of the self and social practices at the *fea* are consistent, since different participants define modernity in potentially divergent ways, be it through entrepreneurial activities, by accepting Jesus into their heart, or by collecting knick-knacks. Nor am I claiming that what takes place at the *fea* is unique within Tongan society (with the possible exception of "shopping") or that it constitutes a complete rupture in time or space (cf. Englund and Leach 2000). Indeed, one also hears in other contexts that traditional forms of prestation are burdensome, that Tongans are poor be-

cause they are lazy, and that displaying the belly-button is in fashion in New Zealand; adherents of the LDS Church are over-represented in other contexts (e.g., the gym, the pawn shop); and Tongans outside the *fea* are sometimes heard speaking English to one another, ignoring the possibility that they might be ridiculed (Besnier 2002). Nevertheless, it is the convergence of these symbols and practices, as well as their prominence at the *fea* (i.e., the ease with which they can be witnessed or elicited) that provides a particular flavor to the *fea* and places it in a specific relationship to the rest of Tongan society, characterized by both continuity and rupture, and the analytic meaning I give to “practicing” seeks to capture the resulting tentativeness that permeates the setting. Yet social practices witnessed at the *fea* all focus on similar dilemmas: reconciling the potential contradictions between the local and the global, and positioning the self vis-à-vis a “traditional” and a “modern” order through an active construction of tradition and modernity. Agents offer divergent “solutions” to these dilemmas, which range from finding a bargain, finding Jesus, making a profit, or defining oneself as part of a larger world.

The *fea* emerges as an important context in which certain segments of Tongan society negotiate their encounter with the rest of the world through the mediating agency of their diasporic contacts. This encounter is material, since objects constitute the focus of participants’ attention, but it is also ideational, in that it foregrounds matters of morality, selfhood, and desirability. In addition, participants use this encounter to actively engage in selecting, transforming, and localizing objects and symbols. Shoppers and sellers want certain things from the West, from modernity, and from their diasporic relatives, but not others. The encounter is thus one of negotiation, and is illustrative of the agency with which many on the world periphery approach their engagement with modernity (e.g., Burke 1996, Comaroff and Comaroff 1997, Ferguson 1999, Gewertz and Errington 1999, Gillette 2000, Hoodfar 1997, Liechty 2003, Meyer 1999, Piot 1999). “Modernity does not just happen. It is the result of social actors pursuing their own culturally patterned but indeterminate goals” (Abu Hashish and Peterson 1999:7).

A recurrent theme here is the multiple ways the *fea* is marginal to the Tongan social order. It is marginal in a literal sense: the Tu’imatamoana site is as far from town as one can be without leaving the urban area, and when the Market Authorities earmark a new site for a second *fea*, it is at Tofoa, which is just as geographically marginal. The *fea* is also on the fringe because of its shabbiness, indecorous character, and temporary appearance, on muddy or dusty site (depending on the season) and under makeshift awnings that barely shelter

sellers, customers, and objects in the event of a downpour. The liminality goes further. As I have demonstrated at length, the *fea* attracts the socially marginal, the disaffected, and those who have turned their back on the System, particularly women. It is the great social leveler of Tongan society, and participants leave the potentially stifling hierarchy and the social gulf between local and foreigner at the entrance of the marketplace, even though these dynamics are also what make mainstream Tongan society work. The *fea* is also the result of a creative approach to the law, since most objects are imported through the back door and the origin of some is even a little suspect. These characteristics contrast with hegemonic versions of modernity in this society, which associate it with cleanliness, discipline, centrality, and respect for the law, and conflates modernity with modernization, free-market rationalization, and development.¹⁹

What emerges from this apparent paradox is that, despite its importance and attractiveness, the *fea* is subtly subversive of the social order, and I venture that it is precisely this quietly subversive role that makes it important and attractive. Modernity in Tonga is, at first glance, the prerogative of the elites, both “traditional” (i.e., the high-ranking) and “modern” (the wealthy), who belong to mainstream religious denominations, have everything to gain from the maintenance of hierarchy, and believe in carefully managed development and modernization. It is the elites who control the flow of material and symbolic resources brought in from the outside, travel extensively, flaunt their cosmopolitanism, manage the country’s commercial activities through the Chamber of Commerce, and switch to flawless English whenever they feel like it. By partaking actively in a marketplace on the fringe that nevertheless links them directly to the modern world, the social marginals who are over-represented at the *fea*, as well as everyone else who is attracted to it, quietly challenge the elite’s control of modernity, of the relevance of modernity to the local context, and of the tradition that they construct in contrast to this modernity. Under the guise of being a benign source of consumer pleasure-seeking and small-scale capitalist venture, the *fea* provides a context through which Tongans of more or less disadvantaged or marginal status can claim a say in what constitutes modernity and what constitutes tradition, and negotiate their place in the interstices. At the same time that they seek an active engagement with the outside world through the *fea*, sellers and customers are quietly commenting on local structures of inequality that allow the low-ranking and poor precious few opportunities to voice their discontent. It is precisely the marginality of the *fea* that gives it centrality in people’s lives, for it affords them a voice they cannot claim in more mainstream venues.

Consumption and Cosmopolitanism

I have attempted to unravel the multi-layered, potentially contradictory, and sometimes paradoxical meaning of a second-hand marketplace on the fringe of the capital of a diasporic Polynesian nation-state. This marketplace occupies a liminal position on the geographical and social map of the society in which it operates; yet it also looms prominently in the economic, social, and cultural life of the society. As a buffer zone between modernity and tradition, between the diaspora and the homeland, and between the outside world and Tonga, the Nuku'alofa *fea* is where the boundaries between these contrasting categories are placed under scrutiny and argued over, both benignly and stridently. Not surprisingly, the *dramatis personae* involved is dominated by members of locally marginal categories, who seek out this buffer zone for various reasons: because it helps them deal with their own marginality, because it provides them with a *raison d'être* of one form or another, or because it re-centralizes them in Tongan society (compare Besnier 2002 for a similar argument about another marginal category in Tonga). Furthermore, the *fea* is the stage of a subtle but unmistakable struggle between elite and non-elite Tongans over who owns modernity and who has the right to define its relevance to the local context.

Modernity, the category around which I have organized my analysis, emerges as a contingent, tentative, complicated category in the materials I have presented. I have not attempted to define modernity, an exercise that would defy its own purpose. Rather, as I discussed in the introduction, I locate modernity as the outcome of social practice, rather than as its antecedent: sellers and buyers have only a vague notion of what they are performing when chatting about fashion, code-switching from Tongan to English, and rummaging through knick-knacks, because the self that they are performing is the co-constructed product of the performance.

I began this paper by embracing the widely held anthropological premise that we must seek an understanding of how consumption “works” with reference to local dynamics, a point that can also be applied more generally to the modernity of which consumption is a cornerstone. Indeed, sellers and customers partake in the *fea* not just to sell and buy things, but also to practice particular social activities and presentations of self that may not be appropriate or relevant to other contexts in Tonga. People come to the *fea* to localize a larger world of consumption, of religious beliefs, of social arrangements, and of cultural dynamics. However, what this localization entails is complex, and this complexity is highlighted most strikingly by the apparent contradiction between the liminality of the *fea* and its centrality. This apparent contradiction is

the consequence of the fact that the local and its relationship to the global are defined on several levels at once (morally, psychologically, materially, interactionally, politically) and that at any given time the boundary between the local and the non-local can be drawn differently on different levels.

In addition, consumption and more generally modernity can take many different meanings for different members of society, who may or may not form a sociologically well-defined entity, and this also applies by implication to the tradition that emerges out of modernity. What we witness at the *fea* is not just a celebration of the multiplicity of modernities, but also, and more importantly, a critical commentary on local structures of inequality that take for granted that both tradition and modernity are the prerogatives of the high ranking and wealthy. “The concept of the modern itself comes to be understood and utilized by a range of social actors in the context of particular power-laden social relationships both within and between countries” (Walley 2003:34). The *fea* provides a context for an efflorescence of positions vis-à-vis the social order in Tongan society, as disenfranchised layers of society utilize their access to the modernity of the outside world (through objects, fashion styles, or simply the knowledge that these fashion styles exist) to define their relationship to the traditional order, and the social and material inequalities and systems of obligation that sustain them. This is why, at first approach, the *fea* appears to be the local site, and the Chamber of Commerce and its membership appear to be agents of modernity, while in fact, upon closer scrutiny, the reverse turns out to be the case.

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ENDNOTES

¹The ethnographic present in this paper refers to the year 2000. Developments in the specific ethnographic details have taken place since, but they do not undermine the analysis I present here.

²In 2000, Tonga's estimated per-capita GDP was US\$2,000, and it has been in steady decline since. (For the purpose of comparison, the estimated per-capita GDP of the United States was \$36,200 in the same year.) Economic geographers Bertram and Watters (1985) coined the acronym "MIRAB" (Migrations, Remittances, overseas Aid, and state Bureaucracy) to characterize the economic underpinnings of Pacific Island micro-states like Tonga, which they described as stable over time despite their apparent unviability (see also Bertram 1999, Evans 1999, Sato 1997).

³Using classical models of class formation, James argues against recognizing a "coherent, durable middle class in Tonga capable of effective class action" (2003:336). However, she pays scant attention to the effect of transnationalism on the matter and instead searches for very localized evidence of class, ignoring that class-marked thought and action on the world periphery always operate in reference to global dynamics (cf. Liechty 2003). Furthermore, coherence, durability, and explicit class consciousness are hardly characterizing features of the middle classes even in Western late capitalism, among whom insecurity, discontent, and internal competition reign (e.g., Newman 1988, Wolfe 1999), so it makes little sense to look for Tongan middle classes by focusing on these traits. The materials that I present in this paper provide rich social and cultural evidence that a Tongan middle class exists, but that class identity is, like everywhere else, complex and constantly transversed by other parameters of identity (e.g., rank, gender, religious affiliation).

⁴For example, in 1999, both Australia and New Zealand imposed stringent new restrictions on visa issuance, even for visitors' and medical visas, in the form of bonds (e.g., A\$5,000) that immigration authorities forfeit for the most insignificant reasons, such as a change in travel plans.

⁵In mainstream churches, families (often egged on by their older female members) compete regularly to provide sometimes substantial sums of money to the pastor, particularly during the *Mē* and *Sepitema* festivals, named after the months of May and September respectively, during which some families sink into serious penury to fend for their prestige before congregations, villages, and urban neighbourhoods (the amounts given by each family is announced on radio and through other public channels).

⁶Sabbath observance is enshrined in Tongan law, which curtails all non-essential work and recreation. On Sundays, flights cannot land and ships cannot dock.

⁷The Tongan currency, the *Pa'anga* (T\$), was worth about US\$.80 in 2000, but it fell sharply in 2002 to approximately US\$.45.

⁸Since the funeral of even distant relatives dictates that one be in mourning for up to 100 days, many Tongans, particularly conservative elderly women, wear black for many days of the year. On the death of a very high-ranking person, such as a member of the royal family, the entire country goes into mourning, and black clothing is de rigueur. Such events create an enormous demand for black clothing at the *fea*, in shops, and in exchange networks.

⁹The literature on the impact and patterns of remittances and concomitant phenomena in Tonga and other Pacific microstates is vast (e.g., Brown 1998, Brown and Foster 1995, Faeamani 1995, James 1991, Satō 1997, Sudō 1997, Vete 1995, as well as numerous policy papers and unpublished theses). At least two teams of economists (Brown and Connell 1993, van de Walle 1998) saw in earlier incarnations of the Nuku'alofa *fea* a potentially rich source of insights into remittances from overseas Tongans to Tongans based in the islands, and have attempted to assess these "hidden" forms of remittances, i.e., remittances that bypass bank transfers or other means that can be institutionally monitored. While I welcome

the insights provided by these prior projects, I find much to be desired in the categories they bring to the context (e.g., fetishization of cash, investment vs. church obligations, goods paid for vs. goods sent as gifts) and in their methods. My purpose is also different: I am less interested in measuring the value of goods than in understanding how value (taken in much broader sense) is assigned to goods, how people negotiate their position vis-à-vis both goods and other people, and how the *fea* is much more than just a context in which clothes, shoes, and bottles of shampoo change hands.

¹⁰*Koloa faka-Tonga* are also commodified, re-commodified, and de-commodified at the very successful pawn-shops (*kautaha nō pa'anga*) in operation around Nuku'alofa and in Tongan overseas communities. These businesses lend money on a short-term basis, accepting *koloa faka-Tonga* as preferred collateral, and sell the traditional valuables if the borrower does not repay the loan. Ping-Ann Addo and I are currently writing about this phenomenon.

¹¹The complex interplay of the local and non-local in the production of “local” objects and symbols is not a new phenomenon in Tonga. Since pre-contact days, Tongans have incorporated into local networks of prestation and performance Samoan fine mats or *kie Ha'amoā* (Kaeppler 1999), Fijian weapons, dances borrowed from 'Uvea and Futuna, tattoos by Samoan tattoo-craftsmen, and wives from all surrounding Polynesian groups. What is perhaps relatively new is the extent to which localness is nowadays produced through the interplay of the local and the transnational.

¹²In contrast, at the Talamahu Market, some sellers who occupy “regular” stalls (i.e., for more than a couple of weeks) employ a relative, a friend, or an unrelated third party to tend their stalls. In a couple of cases, the employee has never actually met the owner of the merchandise, who lives overseas and prefers employing a stranger with a trustworthy reputation to entrusting the merchandise to an unremunerated relative, as the latter is likely to feel entitled to helping him- or herself to the goods or to the income generated.

¹³Calculating the net profit is not possible, because sellers do not keep detailed enough accounts (although the more entrepreneurial do keep some records of sales). However, it is suggestive that most small-scale sellers receive the merchandise they sell as gifts, and therefore the profit margin is nearly 100%, at least in the lower part of the range.

¹⁴All names mentioned in this paper are pseudonyms.

¹⁵Many Tongan married couples are geographically separated for extended periods of time, often years at a time. Although separation always contains the possibility of abandonment, particularly when the husband is the party in residence overseas, it is considered a sign of mutual *fe'ofa'ofa'aki* “mutual care, reciprocal empathy,” in that the spouses are viewed as sacrificing altruistically their self-centred desire to be “taken care of” by one another to meet each other's material needs. See Gailey (1992) for a useful discussion.

¹⁶Women in Tonga also cannot own land, and traditionally have to rely on their brothers to meet their agricultural needs. This situation, as well as ideologies of gender and work, also means that women do not engage in export agriculture (principally vanilla and pumpkin), and places them at an economic disadvantage compared to men. However, no one explicitly ties these factors to the preponderance of women at the *fea*.

¹⁷The textual fragments cited in this article are transcribed as faithfully as possible from audio recordings using conventions developed by conversation analysts (Atkinson and Heritage 1984). The conventions relevant to the fragments cited here are:

,	continuing intonation, not necessarily at the end of clauses
.	falling intonation, not necessarily at the end of sentences
?	rising intonation, not necessarily in questions
!	animated tempo
(0.5)	timed pause in seconds and tens of seconds
=	latching turns (with no pause or interruption)

.hhh	inhalation
word-	cut-off or self-interruption
wo::rd	lengthened vowel
WORD	very loud voice
(word)	not intelligible, conjectured transcript
((comment))	transcriber's comment

In addition, utterances in English are in roman font and utterances in Tongan are in italics.

¹⁸The classic cases are the high proportion of standard features of English in the speech of lower-middle-class New Yorkers in the 1960s (Labov 1966) and middle-class Standard English-speaking African-Americans' use of African American Vernacular English features in contexts where native speakers of the dialect would not use them (Baugh 1992). Baugh terms the latter case "hypocorrection" since the features that are the object of exaggeration have low prestige in mainstream society, even if they function as solidarity markers for African Americans.

¹⁹In 2000, Crown Prince Tupouto'a, an entrepreneurial enthusiast of free-market-driven capitalism, created a minor international uproar by making the following disparaging remarks about his subjects in a local magazine interview that was picked up by international newswires: "[A]s it is, [Tongans] see nothing wrong with allowing their pigs to run all over their townships leaving pig droppings everywhere. No one has yet made the connection between this and the failure of the tourism industry to attract the required number of tourists.... We have a very long way to go and many changes to make in Tonga's national life before we can even approach comparing ourselves to Singapore. Just try getting Tongans to work in a factory from 9 to 5 every day without suddenly having to attend a funeral for a week" (Fonua 2000). The contrast he draws between the dirt and lack of discipline on the one hand and, on the other hand, a modernized, technologically oriented nation with a successful tourism industry is a common theme, particularly among Tongan elites.

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