When gifts become commodities: pawnshops, valuables, and shame in Tonga and the Tongan diaspora

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Far from being displaced by modernity, the exchange of women’s textile valuables of little practical value but enormous ritual significance is increasing in importance in Tonga and amongst Tongan migrants in the industrial West. The dwindling production of and increasing demand for these textile valuables have prompted entrepreneurs to open pawnshops, where customers who are monetarily poor mortgage valuables and customers lacking in exchange networks buy unclaimed valuables. Pawnshops convert valuables into commodities and transform the social relations among those involved. However, the one emotion that underlies traditional exchange, shame, remains central to the transactions, albeit in unevenly distributed fashion. The transformation of textiles from gift to commodity displays both rupture and continuity with pre-modern forms of exchange, continuity operating at the level of emotional subjectivities. Our analysis foregrounds objects, on the one hand, and emotions, on the other, as shaping the course of cultural and social history.

Modernity, rupture, and continuity

One of anthropology’s enduring contributions to our understanding of modernity has been to demonstrate the persistence of cultural continuity even as society undergoes momentous change associated with colonialism, decolonization, missionization, state formation, or globalization. This persistence rests in part on people’s uncanny ability to conjoin seemingly incommensurable practices and symbols. Whether through syncretism, hybridization, intersubjective negotiation, or other forms of entanglement, people engage in pre-capitalist forms of exchange right under the nose of capitalism; valorize conservative belief systems to help them understand the future; give tokens of globalization a quintessentially local meaning; and turn gifts into commodities and commodities into gifts. Three major themes transpire from these insights, developed in a now vast corpus of contemporary ethnography: one, people caught in the storm of history exert more agency on their destiny than meets the eye, even when formidable external forces appear to control this destiny; two, people domesticate the new and unexpected so as to make it conform to the aesthetic and ethical order of their ongoing lives, at least as long as they can; and, three, history is a complex interweaving of rupture and continuity (to paraphrase loosely Sahlins 2000: 9).
Particularly fruitful sites for the investigation of these dynamics are the social practices and cultural elaborations that gravitate around objects. Indeed, as Mauss (1967 [1925]) demonstrated long ago, humans’ relations to objects and the relations that they create between themselves through objects can be determinative of a host of other dynamics in society and culture, and change or continuity in the way in which agents relate to objects can encapsulate wide-ranging socio-cultural transformations. As Wilk aptly remarks, ‘[J]ust as people use objects to invent tradition, they also use them to invent the future’ (1995: 98). In what follows, we analyse how the past and future, continuity and change, and locality and extra-locality are interwoven in contemporary exchange practices of textile valuables in Tonga, South Pacific, objects whose texture, manufacture, and exchange over-elaborate continuity through time. These textiles display all the characteristics of archetypal gifts: they have virtually no utilitarian value outside of the ceremonial contexts in which they are displayed and exchanged; they figure centrally in the reproduction of local social life; they represent the quintessence of tradition; and the very finest of them bear names and the imprint of the lineages who have owned them and persons who wore them. Many Tongans, particularly those who have most to gain from their circulation, uphold a prescriptive image of valuables and of their exchange that almost appears to be inspired by the Maussian definition of the gift. However, no gift, gift exchange, or gift economy conforms exactly to their Maussian idealizations, as we know well from the last two decades’ worth of rethinking Mauss (e.g. Appadurai 1986; Carrier 1995; Godelier 1996; Graeber 2001; Gregory 1982; Parry & Bloch 1989; Sykes 2005; Yan 1996), and Tongan valuables are no exception. For example, the boundary between prescriptively traditional valuables and other kinds of objects is increasingly opaque; money figures prominently in exchange, alongside valuables; valuables circulate far beyond the local context, in a huge circuit of transnational connections constituted by the Tongan diaspora; and valuables can be sold and pawned.

Our analysis focuses on the last feature, one of the most concealed ways in which Tongan valuables circulate and penetrate the realm of commodities. Tongan pawning was inspired by pawning in the urban West where diasporic Tongans reside, although Tongan pawn businesses differ from their Western model in that they almost exclusively deal in Tongan valuables. Pawning emerged at the historical convergence of two trends in the last four decades. One is the gradual emergence since the 1970s of a non-aristocratic elite with ambition and capital derived from entrepreneurial ventures and transnational connections. The other is the decrease in the number of women capable of and willing to manufacture textiles, coupled with the ever-increasing demand for textiles, the increasing unpredictability of ceremonies, and the increasingly large quantities expected in ceremonies. Indeed, far from being pushed aside by a capitalism that everyone in Tonga appears to be embracing enthusiastically (even those who have most to lose from it), valuables and their exchange are gaining in significance in contemporary Tonga, a classic case of the proliferation of conservative objects and practices at the same time as agents’ lives are increasingly steeped in capitalism, consumption, and modernity (cf. Brison 2001; Conklin 1997; Friedman 1999; Geschiere 1997; Karlström 2004; and many others). In fact, valuable production and circulation figure prominently in a quintessentially Tongan understanding of development (fakalakalaka), to the dismay of aid agencies (Horan 2002).

The emergence of pawning has several consequences. Most straightforwardly, it commoditizes textile valuables by setting systematic monetary values in an
unprecedented fashion. It also restructures social relations: the gift recipient is replaced by the pawnbroker, the giver becomes customer, and expertise in assessing the quality of valuables shifts from women to men, and from being an assessment of people’s socio-cultural capital to being an assessment of the monetary value of objects.

While pawning appears radically to alter the make-up of traditional valuables and people’s relation to them, many aspects of the practice are also continuous with the past. In particular, pawning operates within the same cultural logic as gift exchange, in that it centralizes one emotion, mà, which Tongans commonly translate as ‘shame’, as the pivotal experiential regulator of exchange. People who pawn valuables experience shame, but so do pawnshop owners and the customers who come to buy valuables not collected before the agreed date. However, the distribution of the affect among the different parties is uneven in scope and quality. It is this tension between reproduction and change, illustrative of the insight that ‘continuity of a system [never] occurs without its alteration, or alteration without continuity’ (Sahlins 1981: 67), and the way in which this tension operates across various aspects of social and cultural life, that we find of theoretical and comparative interest.

Pawning has other consequences. Becoming a pawnbroker in Tonga presupposes substantial material, social, and cultural capital: large amounts of cash to loan out, storage and office facilities, entrepreneurial risk-taking and know-how, close kinship ties to women experts in valuables, and so on. But it also presupposes a certain imperviousness to potentially shame-inducing allegations of seeking to make money from poorer people’s customary obligations. Not surprisingly, Tongan entrepreneurs who venture into this very lucrative business are not just wealthy but also, in one fashion or another, on the social fringe. The continuities and discontinuities embedded in the commodification of Tongan valuables are closely tied to the agency of a few, whose privileged position results from both their material and their symbolic position in the system. Because pawning is lucrative business, and because it is lucrative at the expense of the poor, it exacerbates patterns of material inequality already operative in Tongan society. Cultural discontinuities are closely tied to pre-existing socio-economic fractures, and we argue here for closer attention to the way in which social inequality determines history-making agency.

Our ethnography enables us to explore the persistent anthropological problem of disentangling various forms of historical processes, in particular the extent to which, at times of particularly dramatic upheaval, social and cultural arrangements experience continuity or rupture. But in order to understand what changes and what stays the same, we must cast our net wide over people’s subjective experience of exchange. In particular, we seek an understanding of how objects, on the one hand, and emotion, on the other, shape the course of cultural and social history.

The Tongan ethnoscape
The Tongan ethnoscape comprises two components – approximately 115,000 people (2006 estimate) living on the thirty-six inhabited islands of Tonga, spread in a north-south arc on the western edge of Polynesia; and a diaspora of possibly twice as many people, scattered throughout the world but concentrated in the urban centres of New Zealand, Australia, Hawai’i, and the North American mainland (the San Francisco Bay Area, Greater Los Angeles, Seattle, and Salt Lake City). The capital, Nuku’alofa, located on the largest island, Tongatapu, is home to a third of the population, including the
country’s sovereign, and the locus of all governmental, economic, and social activities consequential to the country and the diaspora.

Tongan society is highly stratified. While stratification is ancient, the particular form it takes today dates back to the unification of the islands in 1845 by a chief from the central Ha’apai group who established himself through conquest as King George I of Tonga, founder of the current dynasty. The current monarch (since 2006), Siaosi Tupou V, sits at the apex of the society’s pyramidal social structure, supported by an aristocracy that bases its power on the control of both local resources (land and tribute payments from commoners) and resources associated with modernity (business ventures, overseas investments, etc.).

State and society rest on a blend of selected elements deemed traditional and selected elements deemed modern, the subject of constant negotiation at both micro and macro levels (Philips 2004). For example, the state frequently bills itself as ‘the last Polynesian Kingdom’ and as an upholder of Christianity, features that Tongans consider illustrative of ‘timeless tradition.’ However, Tongans also emphasize the fact that their society is an economically forward-looking entity despite the paucity of its resources. They refer to this blend of tradition and modernity asanga faka-Tonga, ‘the Tongan way’ (akin to the various versions of ‘the Pacific Way’ extant in the Pacific Islands region), the nature of which is the subject of some anxiety in the face of rapid socio-cultural and political changes and the challenges that many think they pose to the conservative order.

Modernity and the new forms of power that it has engendered have facilitated the emergence of a new middle class. The successful entrepreneurs, government officials, and other well-to-do commoners who make up this social class derive their wealth from both local and transnational resources, such as economically successful overseas-based relatives and import-export ventures. Less well-to-do commoners meet their daily needs by combining remittances from overseas with farming, service-industry work, and other forms of low-level waged labour.

Tongans constantly foreground rank as a determiner of social action, but rank is both fragile and contested. Its fragility generates anxiety about decorum and face, the loss of which devalues one’s claims to being worthy of one’s rank or better, and bringsmā, ‘shame,’ onto oneself and one’s family. The contestation of rank takes on a number of forms. Entrepreneurs present a more or less overt challenge to some aspects of the rank-based hierarchy, such as the assumption that traditional forms of commoners’ obligation to the aristocracy will continue to maintain the status quo. Rank is also somewhat diluted by other forms of socio-economic mobility, such as opportunities associated with the diversity of Christian denominations. In a society in which almost everyone is at least nominally Christian, changing one’s denominational affiliation can afford useful avenues for manipulating one’s material and symbolic capital (Decktor Korn 1978). For example, the socially dominant Methodist-derived churches, particularly the state-endorsed Free Wesleyan Church, offer their adherents the chance to seek upward mobility through mainstream means and local contexts. Nevertheless, these denominations contribute to the status quo by emphasizing communalism and making their adherents vie for status through competitive gift-giving to the church, which is comparable to rank-based prestation in that both perpetuate the relative poverty of commoners.

Less mainstream churches offer different kinds of possibilities, and they attract Tongans anxious to distance themselves from gift-giving to mainstream denominations.
The most fringe denominations (born-again Christian groups, Pentecostalists, and Evangelical Catholics) pose serious challenges to some of the basic premises of the social order. Navigating the waters between the fringe and the establishment is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS, or Mormonism), which stands out for its embracement of modernity and economic growth, and its emphasis on individual achievement (Gordon 1990; also, more generally, Cannell 2005 and Mitchell 2001). The LDS church has implemented its doctrinal embracement of capitalism by replacing competitive gift-giving with fixed-rate tithing, which facilitates church adherents’ capitalist accumulation. The denomination can therefore support the aspirations of modernity that many Tongans have, but which few are able to fulfil without risking being viewed as selfish.

The generally stagnant national economy is based on agricultural exports and a fledgeling tourism industry, but its corner-posts are foreign aid and remittances from migrants. Tongans have migrated overseas in large numbers since the 1970s. While people migrate for different reasons that have also changed over time (Cowling 1990; Gailey 1992; Ka’ili 2005; Lee 2003; Small 1997), many of these reasons are linked to locally frustrated desires for socio-economic mobility linked to the lack of employment opportunities. Transnationalism and diasporic dispersal have affected every aspect of life in the islands. 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. One of the most commonly cited reasons for migrating overseas is to send remittances back to island-based relatives, although strong forces discourage the practice over the long term (Brown 1998; Brown & Foster 1995). Remittances are part of a complex system of exchange that also involves textile valuables.

**Producing and circulating valuables**

*Koloa faka-Tonga*, or simply *koloa*, ‘Tongan valuables’, fall into two main categories: mats plaited from treated pandanus leaves (*lālanga*); and decorated barkcloth (*ngatu*) manufactured from the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree (Gailey 1987; Herda 1999; Kaeppler 1978; 1995). Marginal forms of *koloa*, called *koloa si’i*, ‘minor valuables’, include machine-sewn quilts, quilts and barkcloth lined with synthetic material (paper or plastic), and non-textiles such as decorated baskets and bottles of fragrant coconut oil. In theory, all adolescent commoner women in the islands learn to make *koloa*, although in practice only certain rural women are actively engaged in its manufacture. Tongans hold conflicting views on the production of valuables: they associate it with very hard manual work and low-prestige village life, but women who can and do produce valuables are also held in high regard as upholders of tradition (Filihia 2001; Helu 1999; Teilhet-Fisk 1991).

On ritual occasions (*kātoanga*) such as funerals, weddings, key birthdays, church events, high school reunions, and rank- and state-affirming ceremonies, women formally gift combinations of *koloa* alongside the prestige yams, pigs, and kava root (*Piper methysticum*) that men present, as well as cash, food, and other objects, which both women and men provide. *Koloa si’i* generally appear in these rituals as complements to canonical valuables, and are considered less important. Low-ranking women fold the canonical textiles in a highly prescribed way ahead of time under the supervision of high-ranking women to present them in large bundles (Fig. 1). At a child’s first birthday, for example, relatives of the parents affirm their stakes in the progeny of the
extended family by giving koloa to key members of their respective lineages, local pastors, and nobles. Gift-giving has both short- and long-term significance: food ensures the success of the feast and subsequent distribution of leftovers, while durable wealth affirms the propitiousness of the child and his or her future integration into exchange networks and the hierarchical order (Young Leslie 2004).

The highest-ranking families own a number of centuries-old and densely plaited mats, which bear names and are brought out on very special occasions (Kaeppler 1999). For nobles and commoners alike, these textiles encapsulate the essence of both koloa faka-Tonga and the rank-based social order. Because they do not circulate, they are inalienable possessions of the lineages that hold them. Other mats may circulate but retain only the specific imprint of their givers during ceremonial presentation, whose names and gift lists are called out by the master of ceremony. The mats lose this imprint soon after joining the often enormous piles of textiles, illustrating the fleeting nature of inalienability (cf. Laidlaw 2000; Mosko 2000). However, in other instances, koloa faka-Tonga retain a metaphorical potential of inalienability, because people tacitly associate them with the inalienable named mats that epitomize koloa faka-Tonga (in a way that parallels how Tongans of all ranks like to associate themselves with the high-ranking and their symbols).

Tongan sociality assumes a division of labour between kingdom-based relatives, who ensure the production of koloa for both local and overseas use, and overseas relatives, who provide cash remittances. Both valuables and cash come together in ceremonies through the aesthetics of the gift. The cash is inserted into an envelope called sila pa’anga (literally ‘envelope of money’), the form of which holds significance: it is usually white, hand-lettered with the name of the recipient, and conspicuously placed on top of the folded bundles of koloa (Fig. 2). For diasporic Tongans, remittances to island-based relatives ensure their ongoing access to valuables, and therefore their ability to demonstrate their social and cultural competence. Cash and valuables are interconnected in intricate ways that are foregrounded at the pawnshop, as we shall explain presently.

Figure 1. Presentation of koloa faka-Tonga to the child’s family at a first birthday, alongside decorated, store-bought baskets of toiletries (Auckland, New Zealand; photograph by Ping-Ann Addo).
Cash and valuables are becoming further intertwined as Tongans are commoditizing *koloa* itself, a practice that is clearly on the increase but that has a long-standing historical genealogy since old mats and pieces of barkcloth are found in museum collections around the world (Addo 2004a; cf. Linnekin 1991 on Samoa). In both the kingdom and the diaspora, the demand for *koloa* is viewed as growing, for reasons ranging from the rising unpredictability of weddings (because young people today want to marry for love and do so far too fast) to the increasing anxiety of diasporic Tongans about displaying their allegiance to *anga faka-Tonga*, ‘the Tongan way’, as they assimilate into the host societies. The qualifier *faka-Tonga*, ‘in the Tongan style’, that Tongans often use to modify the word *koloa* indexes a self-conscious reflexivity constitutive of this anxiety. Outside of ritual exchange, Tongans may obtain *koloa* from a relative or friend in exchange for another type of *koloa* or a small gift, such as food. *Koloa* can also be readily obtained for purchase at local markets. At the Talamahu central market in Nuku’alofa, for instance, several entrepreneurs regularly sell *koloa*, including one who sells repossessed *koloa* from a pawnshop (Fig. 3). In the diaspora, particularly in New Zealand, Tongans sell *koloa*, generally of poorer quality, at Pacific Island fairs and markets.

For decades, Tongan women have manufactured fragments of decorated barkcloth and mats for the skeletal tourist trade, which seems to have reached its apex as a source of income for poorer Tongans during the 1970s, before the major diasporic exodus (Connelly-Kirch 1982; van der Grijp 1993). As in other parts of the world (e.g. Davis 1999; Rasmussen 2003), Tongan women adapt the objects in size, style, and function to what tourists expect, can carry away, and find use for: for instance, table mats, baskets, and fans decorated with turtles and dolphins, maps of Tonga, and stylized figures drinking kava. Sold in temporary markets on cruise-ship days, these objects are also on sale in some specialty shops around town and the Langa Fonua women’s handicrafts cooperative, which Queen Salote III founded in 1953 (von Gizycki 1997). The sheer size and lack of practical use of *koloa* that Tongans exchange in prestation contexts render them of no interest to most Western visitors. Both handicraft and *koloa* production are viewed as rural manual labour, but, given a choice, women choose making *koloa* over handicrafts (Horan 2002).
In non-tourist contexts, non-elite Tongans sell *koloa* because they are constantly short of the cash they need for traditional prestation as well as numerous routine needs: purchasing groceries, paying for transportation, paying utility bills where public utilities are available, organizing family feasts, contributing to weekly church collections, paying for school fees and uniforms, helping out local relatives, entertaining relatives visiting from overseas, calling them to ask for more money, funding trips overseas, and posting bonds for visas.\(^6\) Because of the constant need for it and the limited employment opportunities, cash generally falls through people’s fingers and is the subject of enormous anxiety, particularly for those with few or less-than-generous overseas relatives.\(^7\) Selling *koloa* potentially helps alleviate this anxiety. However, selling *koloa* is stigmatized as an act of desperation. Not having ready access to valuables for emergencies such as funerals and gunshot weddings brings shame on persons and families and puts into question their commitment to tradition, since *koloa* continues to be an expression of Tongan identity, especially for women. A problematic yet expedient solution to the dilemma of meeting both cash and valuable needs is to pawn *koloa*.

**Pawnshops**

During our fieldwork in 2000 and 2001, there were nine active Tongan-operated *kautaha nō pa’anga*, literally ‘money loaning companies’, eight in Nuku’alofa and one in the diaspora, which accepted textile valuables as collateral for instant loans (Fig. 4). Tongan entrepreneurs established the first of these businesses in the 1980s, inspired by pawnshops in Western cities, although our informants disagree as to exactly where and when the inspiration originated.\(^8\) As collateral for loans, Nuku’alofa pawn businesses accept neither minor valuables (baskets, quilts, and synthetic barkcloth) nor high-quality *koloa* such as very fine and ancient mats, because they are very difficult to resell, and very few people would consider parting with such objects anyway. Pawnshop operators have an overwhelming preference for Tongan valuables over other forms of collateral, rarely accepting cars, electronic equipment, or other consumer goods,
because they don’t resell well either and are difficult to store out of the reach of unruly children and destructive teenagers. More importantly, despite the popularity of consumer goods as prestige markers of modernity, they still pale in importance against the persistent value of *koloa faka-Tonga*. Tongan pawn businesses thus diverge radically from the Western-style businesses that inspired them, and have acquired a quintessentially localized nature. While presenting at first glance a radical break from past practices, pawning is predicated on continuities in what counts as symbolically and materially important.

Generally, pawnshop operators set prices for different categories of textiles, offering T$100, for example, for a piece of barkcloth of 10 *langanga* (an approximate hand-measured unit of 14-18 inches).9 Loans generally amount to between T$100 and T$1,000, but may go as high as T$5,000. Customers have one month to repay loans, at a monthly interest rate of 10 to 15 per cent. Should customers default on their loan, the pawnshop owner, usually after a brief grace period, advertises the *koloa* over national radio or takes it to the marketplace, selling it for two to three times the amount of the loan, depending on the entrepreneur and on the time of the year (Table 1). Demand is so great that the textiles are usually gone within a couple of hours.

Pawnshops are potentially very profitable businesses. Businesses in our sample report annual profits of up to T$30,000. At the time of our survey, the most successful business had T$27,000 loaned out, while the most modest averaged T$500-1,500 in loans at any given time. The total inventory of textiles left as collateral at Nuku’alofa businesses during our fieldwork ranged from T$1,500 up to $60,000 per business, the largest inventories requiring the operators to store the valuables in relatives’ houses in nearby villages. These figures are not surprising given the fact that people will pay over T$1,000 for a well-made mat for a prestation that will impress, but they contrast sharply with most families’ modest incomes, and explain the extent of most Tongans’ anxiety over both money and valuables.

In the diaspora, as far as we know, the only loan business that accepts *koloa faka-Tonga* as collateral is in Auckland, the city with the largest diasporic Tongan
Several other Tongan loan companies operate in Auckland, but accept
other kinds of collateral. Loan businesses are singularly visible on the Tongan scene in
New Zealand because they announce on Tongan-language radio the names of people
who have defaulted on their loans, and publish in the Tongan-language press their
names, photos, villages of origin, and amounts owned in rather sordid full-page dis-

Table 1. Comparison of the value of koloa as collateral and at the marketplace (mid-2001). A
piece of barkcloth of 50 langanga in length may be used as a gift to a particularly significant
person or at an important ceremony, but it may also be cut into 4-langanga or 5-langanga
pieces, which are the standard sizes for gift exchange between commoners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of koloa</th>
<th>Resale value at the marketplace (T$)</th>
<th>Value as collateral in a range of pawnshops (T$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Konga ngatu (4 or 5 langanga in length)</td>
<td>80-100</td>
<td>20-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-langanga ngatu (called ‘fuatanga’ by commoner women)</td>
<td>300-400</td>
<td>100-250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-langanga ngatu (ngatu launima) Double-layered floor mat (fala), length:</td>
<td>800-1000</td>
<td>300-750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 feet</td>
<td>250-350</td>
<td>100-190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 feet</td>
<td>300-400</td>
<td>150-180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 feet</td>
<td>350-500</td>
<td>170-280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 feet</td>
<td>500-800</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-layered fine mat (kie tonga), width:</td>
<td>100-120</td>
<td>20-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 feet</td>
<td>120-150</td>
<td>30-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 feet</td>
<td>140-160</td>
<td>40-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 feet</td>
<td>160-200</td>
<td>80-150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-langanga ngatu pepa (low-quality synthetic barkcloth)</td>
<td>300-450</td>
<td>80-100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

population. Several other Tongan loan companies operate in Auckland, but accept
other kinds of collateral. Loan businesses are singularly visible on the Tongan scene in
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names, photos, villages of origin, and amounts owned in rather sordid full-page dis-
plays. The collateral for the loans they give out is shame.

Pawning in Tonga and Auckland is seasonal. While Tongans need money for cer-
emonial occasions that can fall at any time, everyone is under pressure to obtain money
at festival times. Business is most brisk, for example, before Christmas, before annual
donations to the various churches in May and September, and in the weeks leading up
to school fee due dates.

The operational scope of pawn businesses varies, some being highly localized while
others operate across borders and oceans. One business, for example, located in one of
the cubicles of a largely unoccupied and quickly deteriorating shopping centre on the
edge of town, only draws a local clientele from rural areas of Tongatapu. Started in
mid-1999 with capital loaned to the owner by a New Zealander friend, it holds only a
couple of dozen koloa pieces at any given time. In contrast, the couple who own the only
Auckland kautaha no¯ pa’anga that accepts textiles operate an ambitious and astute
transnational commerce with forfeited goods. Attuned to currency exchange rates,
which in 2001 favoured the US and Australian currencies over the New Zealand dollar,
the wife regularly visits relatives in Sydney and Salt Lake City, selling the valuables that
she brings along and turning a profit even after deducting her travel expenses. The
ability to engage in transnational commerce of this kind is predicated on the entrepre-
neur’s ability to travel or access trustworthy agents. So while this particular entrepre-
neur can make trips out of New Zealand, another entrepreneur is tied to Tonga because
the business is a side-operation to his employment as a high-profile civil servant. He also knows no one overseas whom he can trust, who can judge koloa quality, and who knows how to handle business. An overseas agent would need to ‘have connections’, and diasporic contacts who fit the bill ‘have no time’. These three businesses represent the range of different approaches among pawnshops, and bear witness to the interconnected nature of tradition-enhancing concerns (e.g. visiting relatives) and modern-style business planning. Pawnshops bring together local and diasporic agents, money and textiles, and continuity and change in an economy of traditional obligation as well as entrepreneurialism that encapsulates the way in which modernity is domesticated in Tonga and elsewhere.

**Pawnshop entrepreneurs**

Pawn businesses are all owned and run by Tongans, as the know-how and social connections that pawnbrokering presupposes are quintessentially Tongan, in contrast to other entrepreneurs in the kingdom (e.g. retail traders, guest house operators, construction entrepreneurs), amongst whom a diverse population is represented, including descendants of early immigrants from Britain or Germany, Fiji Indians married into middle-class families, white expatriates, and recent Chinese immigrants. However, all pawnbrokers also maintain stronger extra-local connections and identifications than most people, which mark them as ‘local others’: for example, one owner is married to a locally based businessman from another country, another maintains a non-marital relationship with a foreigner (of a kind that most Tongans deem morally reprehensible), and most have spent considerable amounts of time overseas and have strong kinship links in the diaspora. Religious affiliation also sets them apart from the rest of the population: as among Nuku’alofa flea-market entrepreneurs (Besnier 2004), a disproportionate number of pawnshop proprietors, six out of nine, are LDS adherents (Mormons constituted 14 per cent of the kingdom’s population in the 2000 census, which, though already the highest national percentage in the world, is very likely to have increased since and one that would be much higher were diasporic Tongans included). The Mormon church’s embracement of modernity and capitalism and its tithing practices have liberated its members, economically and morally, from burdensome obligations that non-Mormons define as part-and-parcel of Tongan identity.

Pawnshop owners vary in terms of the ‘hardness’ with which they conduct business. One entrepreneur admits to asking his own wife to pay something for valuables that she needs to fulfil their ritual obligations. In contrast, many bend their own rules, occasionally offering grace periods, reducing interest rates, and loaning to relatives. Another entrepreneur often shares his profit with the original owner of repossessed valuables, particularly at times of high profit. His business was also one of the most actively patronized among the customers whom we surveyed. Each business and each transaction embodies a different manifestation of the convergence of capitalist enterprise with Tongan values, allowing business owners to negotiate the morality of their capitalistic ventures on a transaction-by-transaction basis, as well as the extent of their own otherness.

To run a pawnshop, entrepreneurs need to have knowledge of categories, values, and resale potentials of textiles, knowledge that is normally the domain of older tradition-orientated women. Of the businesswomen with whom we interacted, some
acquired this knowledge through trial and error, while others rely on knowledgeable employees to estimate the acceptability and value of koloa. Male entrepreneurs place themselves in a complexly gendered situation, in which they take an interest in handling objects that in all other respects are the purview of women. Male entrepreneurs either rely on women relatives to evaluate textiles or learn the skills from them, but this knowledge potentially threatens their masculinity. Significantly, men dominate the pawnshop business (five out of eight, plus one couple), which raises issues of gender, to which we return presently.

**Pawnshop customers**

There is no dearth of pawning customers, a symptom of the constant need for cash that most Tongans experience. When one entrepreneur opened his business in 1999, he initially ran ads on national radio and in the newspaper, but he quickly found advertising unnecessary: by the end of his first week in business, he already had forty customers, and now relies solely on word of mouth. Other entrepreneurs advertise only at festival time.

Customers come from all walks of life, and occasionally even include people of rank. In interviews and surveys we conducted among forty customers in Nuku’alofa and ‘Eua (the second largest island in the Tongatapu group), we learned that pawnshop customers are primarily women, although 20 per cent of surveyed customers were men who were pawning their wives’ koloa. They ranged in age from their early twenties to their mid-eighties, suggesting that people are concerned with koloa and money at every life stage. Tongans from all religious denominations patronize pawnshops, including Mormons (15 per cent of respondents), even though they are not under the same competitive pressure to give to the church as are members of other denominations. For people across the social spectrum, koloa faka-Tonga is an important source of stored wealth and affords them the appearance of meeting the material demands of both traditional and modern life.

Customers approach pawnshops with diverse and conflicting emotions. Lätu (all names are pseudonyms), a 67-year-old retired teacher living on the outskirts of Nuku’alofa, member of the elite Church of England, and distant relative and staunch supporter of the royal family, said that she had only once patronized a pawnshop at the advice of co-workers. She recalls the experience with distaste, saying that all she could think of was repaying the loan: ‘Going to the pawnshop is like being imprisoned ... I would rather be poor than go to a pawnshop again.’ In contrast, 68-year-old unmarried Seini, who has lived in Auckland for over twenty-five years and is retired from twenty years of factory work, derives her only income from a small New Zealand government pension but contributes heavily to the Tongan Methodist Church in Auckland, in the activities of which she is heavily involved (the Methodist Church requires much more of its adherents than does the Church of England). Her obligations at the end of 2001 provide an example of the kind of pressure that led her to pawn her valuables. Shortly after Christmas and her niece’s wedding in late December 2001, both of which had already drained her resources, she presented the designated gift to the pastor who gave the sermon on New Year’s Eve: a piece of ngatu, ‘barkcloth’, a kie tonga, ‘fine mat’, a brightly coloured quilt, and NZ$500 in a sila pa’anga, ‘envelope of money’, from her contribution to her li pa’anga, ‘small credit-scheme group’, in addition to several boxes of store-bought food from her
sisters. The following month, she had to pawn NZ$130 worth of koloa to pay her overdue household bills.

**Pawnshops and shame**

When one of us (PAA) drove her to the pawnshop owned by one of her Mormon nieces in Auckland in January 2002, Seini did not at first reveal our destination, choosing instead to characterize the trip as a social visit. It was only upon arrival that she diverted us to the pawnshop, where her niece greeted her warmly. What was striking about the encounter was Seini’s apparent anxiety to keep it ‘socially minimal’ (Bailey 1997) and end it promptly. From there we headed for a post shop, where Seini paid her phone bill and part of her electricity bill. The minimalist character of the encounter contrasted with the leisurely pace, the serving of food and tea, formal speech-making, and closing prayers that generally characterize social visits, including those with a material purpose. The shame of being monetarily poor and of alienating valuables was aggravated here by the fact that the transaction involved family members.

Even when family members are not involved, the dominant emotion that colours all transactions at pawnshops is mā, an important emotion that Tongans generally characterize as ‘shame’ in English, but which also partially overlaps with what English-speakers would characterize as ‘embarrassment’, ‘shyness’, and ‘humiliation’. There is, of course, a long genealogy of works in psychological and social anthropology on the operation of this and related metaphors in the pre-modern world (e.g. Fajans 1983; Heller 2003; Rosaldo 1983; Shweder 2003; Strathern 1975), which recognizes it as a socially grounded emotion, presupposing an audience witnessing the experiencer’s loss of face, and experienced in response to one’s own or one’s kin’s transgressions of the social order. More recently, inspired by Sahlins’s (1992) contention that agents only come to experience historical rupture if they first experience a collective feeling of inadequacy for what they have in contrast to a referential (commonly Western) Other, a number of scholars (Besnier 2006; Robbins 2003; Robbins & Wardlow 2005) have examined critically the role of a cognate emotion, humiliation, in bringing about radical cultural change. While these efforts are still in their infancy, they do provide a bridge between experiential processes and problems of continuity and change.

In Tonga, shame regulates microscopic aspects of pawnshop transactions, congruently with the emotion’s work in many contexts of the traditional order, such as competitive prestation. For example, some customers travel to the other side of the island to pawn their valuables to reduce the risk of relatives or neighbours seeing them, whereas others worry about being caught carrying koloa from their parked car to the pawnshop. While it is considered shameful for a woman to kole, ‘beg for’ textiles from her relatives (Addo 2004b), it is even more shameful to be seen alienating one’s textiles when one is in need of cash. Shame derives from the fact that Tongans prescriptively expect the kinship system to provide for everyone’s financial, emotional, and ceremonial needs. Patronizing a pawnshop implies that one is poor not only in material goods, but also, and more importantly, in social relations, and therefore poorly integrated into the traditional system. Seini had spent all the cash she had, as well as much energy, on the wedding and the New Year’s presentation to the pastor, yet apparently no one was available in her social network to help pay her bills. So, despite the shame associated with pawning valuables, it was her only
recourse. The anxiety over the potential of shame is distributed equally across genders. Just as women find it shameful to *mole*, ‘waste, lose’ their family valuables, men experience shame if seen as unable to meet their family’s financial needs. Family reputation is the responsibility of both genders.

It is from actions such as taking a circuitous route to the pawnshop, and the comments of other Tongans (who are on constant alert for signs of others losing face, however discreet), that we as ethnographers identify the relevant emotion as shame. We can also read shame in customers’ silence, stooped shoulders, worried brows, and shifting gazes as they approach or leave the pawnshop, using others’ comments as well as their own after-the-fact accounts to confirm our reading (cf. Toren 2005: 277). Shame is inscribed in an abundance of body habitus and decision-making, and is the frequent topic of conversation. It is this over-elaboration that convinces us that shame is the operative emotion, and one that shows remarkable resilience over time.

Pawnshop owners are aware of the importance of shame for their customers, and some admit to capitalizing on it. One entrepreneur we interviewed described the advantage that the location of his business presented, away from the main road, affording customers a relative assurance that they will not be seen coming to or leaving the shop. Another entrepreneur had originally set up shop in one of Tongatapu’s larger villages, but when he shifted his operation to the capital, where anonymity is easier to maintain than in the village, his business tripled. Strategizing on the emotional weight of pawning is an example of larger processes through which Tongans subtly seek to use the possibility of others’ shame to further their own interests, in both traditional and modern contexts (Fig. 5).

Shame also concerns pawnshop owners, whose entrepreneurial activities are widely considered antithetical to traditional values and practices, a pattern that is widely attested throughout the Pacific (Besnier 2004; van der Grijp 2002; 2003; Williksen-Bakker 2004). At best, like other entrepreneurs, pawnshop operators are turning away from a traditional order based on kinship ties and rank-based

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**Figure 5.** ‘*Kautaha Nó***$: Sign directing customers to a pawnshop at the end of a secluded side-road on the outskirts of Nuku’alofa (photograph by Niko Besnier).
obligations, particularly in cases where customers are high-ranking. At worst, they are vulnerable to criticism for banking on other people’s monetary desperation, which runs counter to the ideal of fe’ofo’ofa’aki, ‘mutual empathy’. Pawnshop owners manage this shame by generally refraining from lending money to relatives, preferring to maintain with them a relationship of ongoing reciprocity. But more importantly, their structural position as ‘local others’ enables them to remain relatively unaffected by the fear of shame, although, of course, this further contributes to their marginality.

For male entrepreneurs, who constitute the majority of pawnshop owners, shame suffuses the gendered complexities of pawnshop ownership. First, the pawnshop transaction is a reversal of the traditional gender order: women customers worry about money, while male owners worry about possessing women’s objects and expertise. Further, men’s engagement with women’s valuables and knowledge normally associated with women potentially threatens their masculinity and the expectation that they should rather concern themselves with the agricultural activities that yield men’s ceremonial gifts. Shame can be read, for example, in one of our male informants’ initial insistence that the business belonged to his wife, which later clearly proved not to be the case. Other men highlighted the business functionality of their knowledge of valuables, since entrepreneurial ambition is primarily the domain of men (notwithstanding Tonga’s small but visible cadre of women entrepreneurs). For all pawnshop-owning men, the threat that too intense an involvement with women’s material culture poses to their masculinity was somewhat diluted by the fact that pawning represents only one of several previously established entrepreneurial ventures (which include a travel agency, an import-export business, a souvenir shop, and a garden product shop).

The pawnshop thus emerges as a central nexus in Tonga’s ‘economy of affect’ (Besnier 1995: 99), in which shame operates in different, sometimes contradictory, sometimes complementary, ways. It enables customers to balance the shame of being monetarily poor with the shame of being perceived as poor in valuables and social relations. For entrepreneurs, anxiety around shame arises from their desire to do well in business while not appearing to violate the traditional order, and for male entrepreneurs, being involved in women’s valuables generates the potential of shame. The pawnshop therefore both exacerbates and alleviates shame: it amplifies the shame of poverty and relieves it; it highlights the shame of business while anchoring business in rank-related prestation; it threatens gender roles while reinforcing gendered responsibilities for maintaining the reputation of families. Whether in Tonga or the diaspora, changing anxieties about the place of tradition and modernity in individuals’ lives continue to be worked out at the pawnshop, although in partial fashion and with problematic outcomes. The situation exemplifies the kind of material that enables us to assess the tensions between discontinuity and continuity associated with modernity, tensions that operate materially as well as symbolically, and that highlight the open-ended nature of all projects of modernity.

Conclusion
By providing a modern mechanism in which Tongans can realize the value embodied in traditional valuables without necessarily alienating them for good, pawnshops enable individuals to negotiate their own positionality between family-orientated
exchange-based traditional Tonganness and the needs of the individual in a capitalist and diasporic modernity. We found both old dynamics and new ones at play in pawning for all involved: customers who pawn, customers who buy, and entrepreneurs. Continuity characterizes the emotional experience of exchange, with shame figuring prominently in all aspects of pawning, in the same way that it is the dominant emotion in ritualized exchange. Whether entrepreneurs or consumers, sellers or givers, men or women, homeland- or diaspora-based, tenaciously traditional or adventurously modern, Tongans are subject to the abiding relevance of mā as an emotion. How they negotiate their own shame vis-à-vis the shame of others will continue to play a role in how they incorporate money into their systems of traditional exchange and how their valuables continue to be markers of identity. Ruptures are found in the social relations between transactors, and in the uneven distribution of shame (or perhaps of the fear of shame) among the participants. Both rupture and continuity characterize patterns of social inequality: the pre-existing uneven distribution of wealth makes pawning possible, but pawning aggravates this uneven distribution.

Pawnshop owners’ place in the moral order and the exchange system illustrates the multiple and contradictory opinions about what it means to be a cultural insider in modern Tongan society. Furthermore, the identity markers of pawnshop customers – the average Tongans – are also in flux. Tongan identities are not fixed, and when Tongans ask one another about people whom they gossip about, ‘What denomination does s/he belong to?’, they are demonstrating how aware they are of the importance of church affiliation as a concentrated index of people’s position in the system, in its past as well as its future. Church affiliation in Tonga tells you whether the person is likely to be burdened by obligation but also staunchly traditional, or at the forefront of modernity but flirting dangerously with the margin. It also tells you about the person’s emotions, rank, aspirations, and body habitus (cf. Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo 1991).

While agreeing with characterizations of modernity as diffuse, shifting, and ungrounded (Englund & Leach 2000), we continue to give it a central role in our analysis, not least because, whatever modernity is, it is the object of so much desire and the cause of so much anxiety for our informants (cf. Osella & Osella 2006: 570). We have argued here for a nuanced approach to subjectivities of modernity, to which members of society bring different emotions, different intensities of emotions, as well as different material strategies vis-à-vis objects and money. And it is in the crevices between these different subjectivities that we should seek an understanding of what changes and what stays the same.

NOTES

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Immigration and Citizenship outstayed their welcome in Australia, a situation for which draconian measures were called for (Minister for Ruddock repeatedly targeted Tongan citizens as some of the most serious culprits who ‘unlawfully ... reasons, such as a change in travel plans. Deeply conservative former Australian immigration minister Philip Ruddock, disaffected young Tongan men ransacked the capital’s Central Business District, leaving it in ruins. Complex and ill-understood reasons motivated their actions, including the lack of employment opportunities, the increasing gap between wealthy and poor, the slowness of political reforms, and the ruthlessness of immigration and deportation policies in countries to which Tongans seek to migrate.

In 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 Me and Septemba 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 are announced on radio and through other public channels). The history of such practices becoming the status quo is described in Rutherford (1971) and Lättikufu (1974) and summarized in Addo (2004a). We do not engage directly here with Gailey’s (1987) widely read historical analysis of gender politics and valuables in Tonga because, while theoretically attractive, it is ethnographically problematic (e.g. James 1988).

Few Tongans will agree with this characterization, preferring to highlight instead the honorification and self-abasement in which they engage when the high-ranking are present, or faka’apa’apa, ‘respect’, enshrined, for example, in linguistic structure and practice (Philips 1991; 2000). However, status-climbing is very much part of constructing selfhood for Tongan commoners, perhaps because commoners were not regarded as people in pre-Christian days, and thus had to define a sense of self through chiefs (Martin 1877).

The handicraft industry also alters significantly the gender of objects, because entrepreneurialism, including handicraft production, is generally the domain of men. Women often produce handicrafts for men to sell, in contrast to prestation, where women are in control. An extreme case of gender-based power realignment is that of a middle-aged unmarried ‘fallen Mormon’ male entrepreneur whose Nuku’alofa home, crammed with handicraft raw materials, koloa faka-Tonga, and consumer goods, doubles as a sweatshop in which half a dozen female employees make barkcloth, decorate it, cut it up, and package it as tablemats, coasters, and wall-hangings. He frequently travels to Fiji and Hawai’i with handicrafts for the substantial tourist markets, touting them at destination as either local or ‘Polynesian’ objects, and returning to Tonga with items of clothing for sale to both tourists and Tongans. One of us (NB) encountered his barkcloth souvenirs in the Osaka National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) gift shop, signed by him, ‘Polynesian artist’ (Besnier 2004: 23–4).

In 1999, to discourage Tongans from ‘ overstaying’ temporary permits, immigration departments in Australia and New Zealand imposed stringent 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. Deeply conservative former Australian immigration minister Philip Ruddock repeatedly targeted Tongan citizens as some of the most serious culprits who ‘unlawfully ... outstayed their welcome’ in Australia, a situation for which draconian measures were called for (Minister for Immigration and Citizenship 1996).

In 2003, there were only 15,597 employed wage- and salary-earners in Tonga, that is, approximately 15 per cent of the population (Tonga Department of Statistics 2003).

Pawnshops have long been part of the urban landscape in New Zealand (the earliest and still most common destination for Tongan migrants), as they appear in the 1897 phone directory listing for Wellington (Malcolm McKinnon, pers. comm., May 2005). Diasporic Tongans, who display all the resourcefulness of the urban poor (Lee 2003; Small 1997), would have quickly become familiar with the concept.

The Tongan Pa’anga (TS) was equivalent to US$0.66 in 2000, although it has dropped substantially against world currencies since that time. Tonga’s estimated GDP for 2000 was US$2,000.

The 2001 New Zealand national census enumerated 40,700 Tongans in New Zealand, 78 per cent living in Auckland (Statistics New Zealand 2001). These numbers are probably under-estimates.
Miller contrasts shame with humiliation as follows: ‘[I]f shame is the consequence of not living up to what one ought to, then humiliation is the consequence of trying to live up to what we have no right to’ (1993: 145). Tongans do not seem to uphold this distinction – nor does Nussbaum (2004: 203) – and consider mà to be the operative emotion in both types of situations, although for them the second type is particularly damaging because it also shows that one does not know one’s place in the ranking system.

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Quand les dons deviennent des commodités : monts-de-piété, objets de valeur et honte à Tonga et dans la diaspora tongienne

Résumé

Loin d’être supplanté par la modernité, l’échange des textiles féminins sans grande valeur pratique mais de signification rituelle considérable augmente en importance à Tonga et parmi les immigrés tongiens dans les pays occidentaux industriels. La production décroissante de ces textiles précieux et leur demande croissante ont motivés des entrepreneurs à ouvrir des monts-de-piété, où les clients manquant d’argent mettent à gage leurs textiles précieux et où les clients dépourvus de réseaux de fournisseurs achètent ceux qui restent non réclamés. Les monts-de-piété convertissent ces objets précieux en commodités et transforment les relations sociales entre les personnes concernées. Néanmoins, la honte, une émotion qui...
sous-tend les échanges traditionnels, continue à occuper une position centrale à ces transactions, bien que de façon non équilibrée. La transformation des textiles en commodités présente aussi bien des aspects de rupture que de continuité avec les formes d’échanges pré-modernes, où la continuité s’opère au niveau des subjectivités émotives. Notre analyse met en valeur le rôle déterminant des objets d’une part et des émotions d’autre part dans le cours de l’histoire sociale et culturelle.

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