

Unit 11: Tonga: The Koka Tree

Liuaki Fusitu'a

Facts

Capital	Nuku'alofa
Population	120, 898 (July 2009 estimate)
Highest Point	on Kao Island (1033m)
Language	Tongan and English
Independence	4 June 1970

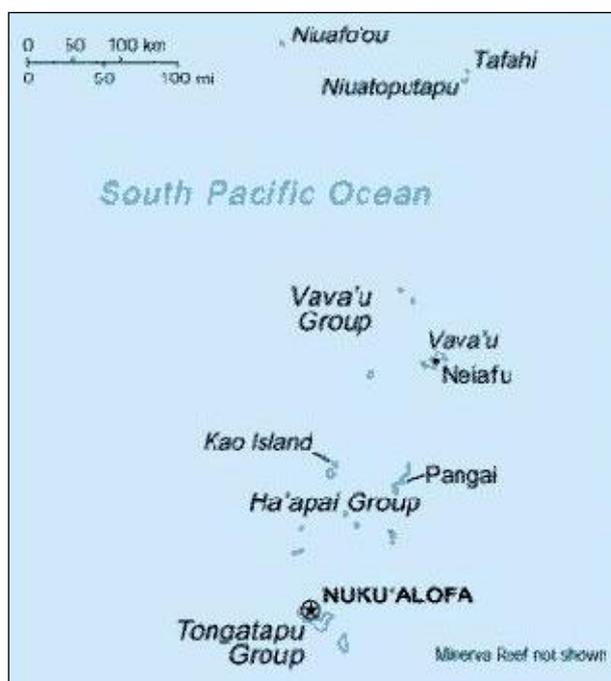


Figure 11.1. Map of Tonga

The traditional place where the Tu'i Kanokupolu titleholders were installed – the “Koka” Tree – is at Pangai Lahi in Hihifo, the Western district on Tongatapu. Oral tradition says that Ngata, a younger son of Mo'ungatonga the sixth Tu'i Ha'atakalaua, was the first of the Tu'i Kanokupolu titleholders.

This chapter is about the role of the Koka Tree in Tongan ceremony and royal titles.

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Describe the site at Hihifo in Tonga
- Understand the connection between 3 Tongan royal titles
- Appreciate how traditions and ceremonies change over time
- Plan a strategy for preserving the Koka Tree
- Understand the importance of local and national heritage

Royal titles and lineages

There were two royal titles in early Tonga. The Tu'i Ha'atakalaua supervised cultivation, ensured that the annual tributes *Inasi/Polopolo* to the Tu'i Tonga were carried out efficiently and on time, and generally to saw to the running of the day-to-day business of the land.

Around 1610, the title-holder Mo'ungatonga decided to create a new kingly line, appointing his younger son Ngata to be the first Tu'i Kanokupolu. One of the reasons offered to explain this act is that Mo'ungatonga was married to a Samoan chiefly woman, Tohuia. She was the daughter of the chief *Ama* of Safata, of Upolu Island in Samoa. The new title was to honour her Samoan relatives. In the name "Kanokpolu", Kano means core or heart and 'Upolu' refers to the island of Upolu. Kanokupolu therefore means the core or heart of Upolu.

Another version suggests that the Hihifo district was at this period rebellious and a strong ruler was required who would reside there and quell the rebellions. Ngata was installed and went out to live in the Hihifo district.

A third, modern version says that the creation of the junior kingly lines was the result of a power struggle. The power of the Tu'i Tonga was reduced by creating a second title, Tu'i Ha'atakalaua. The power of these two titles was reduced by the creation of another title, the Tu'i Kanokupolu. All three versions seem plausible.

After the installation, the administrative duties of the Tu'i Ha'atakalaua were gradually taken over by the Tu'i Kanokupolu. The Tu'i Ha'atakalaua slowly faded into the background losing its political power and unable to challenge the sacred Tu'i Tonga.

By the second and third Tu'i Kanokupolu, the younger brothers/sons of the titleholder had formed new *ha'a*, or lineages. One such *Ha'a* was the *Ha'a Havea*, the younger sons of the third Tu'i Kanokupolu. It became the duty of this *Ha'a* to elect the Tu'i Kanokupolu, although succession was usually from father to eldest son. In some cases the younger brother succeeded to the throne. This happened with the direct ancestors of the present King.

The 12th Tu'i Kanokupolu, the ambitious Tupoumohefo, made history by being the first female Tu'i Kanokupolu. Oral tradition says she was not formally elected. She had lobbied for the title. She wrapped herself in fine mats and sat with her back against the Koka Tree, proclaiming herself to be Tu'i Kanokupolu. Unfortunately her reign was short lived. Her cousin Tuko'aho soon deposed her.

Other historical or royal sites

The royal families of Tonga are buried in large structures that look like stone walled terraces. These are sites of absolute respect. Other sites in Tonga include the ancient “Trilithon”, a large stone archway whose purpose is still debated (see *Fig 12.4 and 12.5*) remains of harbours and canoe landings, the burial sites of chiefs, great nobles and important families, and places where significant events are said to have occurred are scattered about Tongatapu and the Vavau and Ha’apai groups.

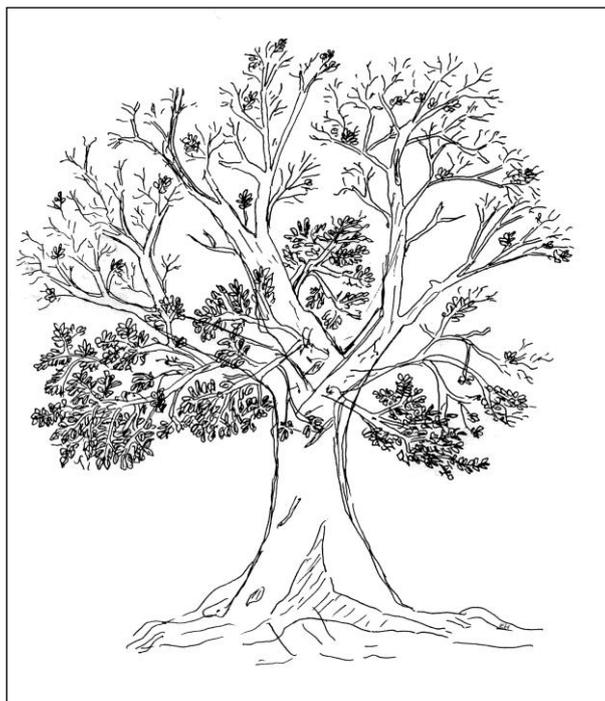


Figure 11.2. Drawing of the Koka Tree



Figure 11.3. Trunk of the Koka tree, against which the Tu'i Tonga sat to claim their title



Figure 11.4. Koka Tree



Figure 11.5. Ha'amonga Trilithon. No one is certain exactly what the purpose of the structure was.



Figure 11.6. Side view of Ha'amonga Trilithon. Without machinery, it must have been very difficult for people to move the rock into position.



Figure. 11.7. Tongan Royal Throne

Questions and Activities

1. Who was Tui Kanokupolu's father?
2. Where is the Tui Kanokupolu house located in Western Tongatapu?
3. List three reasons for the new title being established.
4. What is a *ha'a*?
5. Who was the first female Tui Kanokupolu?

Pangai

According to oral tradition, once the Tu'i Kanokupolu was chosen by the *Ha'a Havea* Chiefs, he or she would then be installed under the Koka Tree.

It is not known whether the first Tui Kanokupolu, Ngata was installed under the Koka Tree or whether the practice started after his death. According to informants from the Hihifo district, the present location of the Koka Tree was probably his residence because the area is called *Pangai Lahi* (*Pangai* meaning meeting place or gathering place, *Lahi* meaning big, great). Wherever the Tu'i Kanokupolu lives, that place is called *Pangai*.

The Hihifo district was not the permanent residence of the Tu'i Kanokupolu. He was residing in Mu'a on the Eastern side of Tongatapu when Captain Cook visited Tonga in 1773-7. It is assumed that his residence was at Mu'a so he could render services to the Tu'i Tonga whose traditional seat is at Mu'a.

The Tu'i Kanokupolu residence at Mu'a may have been temporary and connected with the annual *Inasi* ceremonies. Wherever he took up residence, the place was called Pangai. There are several Pangais scattered throughout the Kingdom of Tonga.

The present Tu'i Kanokupolu's *Pangai* is the area immediately outside of the palace grounds next to the Bank of Tonga (*Pangai Lahi*) and extends across the road to the area outside Treasury (*Pangai Si'i*).

The Koka Tree today

It is not known whether all the Tu'i Kanokupolus were installed in their traditional seat by sitting down under the Koka Tree, with their backs against the trunk. The last to have sat with his back to the Koka Tree at *Pangai Lahi* was Aleamotu'a.

The present Koka Tree that stands by the roadside in Hihifo today is an offshoot of the original tree (See *Figures 11.2, 11.3 and 11.4*). It is not known whether the original tree had fallen or died, but it is suspected that it died sometime after Aleamotu'a was formally installed under it in 1826. The Koka Tree that stands today was used for the official installation of George Tupou 1.

Past and present

The Koka Tree, the traditional installation seat of the Tu'i Kanokupolu title provides a constant link between the past and present.

Today the Royal Throne at the palace, in Nuku'alofa, provides an ingenious way of linking the past and the present. Inlaid in the form of a star, in the back of the throne chair, is a piece of koka wood. This koka wood was taken from the trunk of the Great Koka Tree at Hihifo for formal appointment and installation. Instead, Hihifo and the Great Koka Tree have been brought to them and the age-old practice of sitting with their backs against the Koka Tree continues. Hopefully this will continue in the future.

The present Koka Tree stands at about 15 metres high with a trunk circumference of about 3 metres. It stands majestically in an unfenced *api* by the Hihifo roadside. Ngata's grave lies about 8 metres away.

Today, the site seems neglected, especially Ngata's grave. A small path leading to dwellings behind the site separates the Koka Tree and the Grave. Rev Dr Professor Sione Latakefu of Kolovai had begun efforts to have a plaque erected on the site, to have Ngata's grave fenced and the whole site fenced off.

One gets the impression that the Hihifo people take the site for granted. The national government also fails to give the site due care or monitor its appearance. The site is of great value and its preservation should be upmost in the minds of all Tongans.

The monarchy today

Today, because tradition is respected, a piece of the Koka tree is fitted into the back of the King's throne. Respect for the Monarchy is strong. The birth, marriage or funeral of a member of the Royal Family is an occasion for exceptional crowds to gather, with traditional singing, speech making and gift giving.

There are some Tongans who have sought changes to elections, parliament or the functions of Ministers and Cabinet, but recognition and love for the Monarchy is still widespread and strong.

King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV was King from 1967-2006. The new King is Siaosi Tupou V, so Tongans have mourned one Monarch and celebrated the arrival of another.

Questions and Activities

6. What does "*pangai lahi*" mean?
7. Why was the place called Mu'a so important?
8. In what year was the last Title installed under the Koka Tree?
9. The author says, "the significance of the Koka Tree continues today" – how does it continue?
10. In your own opinion say (in three sentences)
 - (a) why the site of the original Koka Tree is important
 - (b) why local people might ignore it