

# Polynesian *Tapu* in the ‘Deontic Square’: A Cognitive Concept, its Linguistic Expression and Cultural Context

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## Abstract

The Polynesian concept of *tapu*, introduced into European languages as ‘taboo’, is the most salient example of a deontic concept in Tonga. In order to examine whether *tapu* and its related concepts reflect cross-cultural equivalences, we pursue a comparative approach that is conceptually grounded in the ‘deontic square’. By analyzing preferences for linguistic expressions, implications of grammar, and the traditional cultural context, we found remarkable similarities on a structural level. The most significant difference lies in the concept of agency, which is more prevalent in ‘Western’ than in Tongan culture.

## Introduction

In several Indo-European languages, we use ‘taboo’ if we want to indicate that something is absolutely forbidden in a sense that it is not to be touched, not even with words. Despite its current familiarity, ‘taboo’ is a loanword from a Polynesian language, introduced in the second half of the 18th century by Captain James Cook (Lehmann, 1930). Particularly in Tonga, an island Kingdom in the Southwestern Pacific, *tapu* was traditionally so salient a concept that it managed to attract the attention of most early visitors (e.g., Martin, 1991). Our contemporary frequent use of this term may suggest that we have captured its meaning and that it was conceptually compatible with our own notion of prohibition, while also adding a certain quality (i.e., intensity) to it.

However, the term ‘*tapu*’<sup>1</sup> contained a much broader spectrum of meanings than was realized even by Cook himself (Lehmann, 1930). Being a very attentive observer, he conceded not to fully understand the variety of situations it referred to. Why, for instance, should it be *absolutely forbidden* for a boy to touch his father’s head? This leaves us with the central question of how the Polynesian *tapu* fits into our concept of prohibition or, more generally, into a deontic system of social rules.

<sup>1</sup> Terms and their translations will be given in ‘single quotation marks’. Tongan terms are translated according to Churchward (1959), but are restricted as often as possible to an *-ing* form conveying the central idea. A straight quotation mark ‘ signifies a glottal stop, a dash on top of a vowel indicates length (as in ‘faka’ata’). Tongan *concepts* will be put in italics; sentences with numbers will remain unmarked, irrespective of language.

Social rules are at the core of living together in social groups. Their objective is to restrict the freedom of individuals to do as they please in favor of group interests. Often, although not always, they try to facilitate cooperation and smooth relationships by indicating what is permitted and what is forbidden in interaction. The whole set of social rules in a society constitutes an essential part of what defines a particular culture and distinguishes it from others. With regard to content, we assume nearly infinite variety. However, the basic concepts, such as *obligation* and *ban*, should be comparable across cultures, at least to a certain degree.

In general, social rules are specified by the parties involved, by the constraints they set or remove, and by their semantic content. At least two parties should be identifiable: an authority who establishes, modifies, or lifts a rule, and those who are subject to the rule, that is, whose behavior is accordingly restricted – in linguistic terms: *agent* and *patient*.

In English (and German) verbal constructions these two roles can be expressed in different ways. In transitive constructions such as

(1) David forbids Mary to tell the story

the agent of the ban (David) is grammatically reflected as subject, while the patient (Mary) is the grammatical object. Although these roles can be converted if the verb is reversed into its passive form, agent and patient are still clearly identifiable:

(1a) Mary was forbidden by David to tell the story.

In modal constructions using deontic operators such as ‘must’ or ‘may’, however, these roles themselves are affected. Here, the patient of the rule turns not only into a grammatical subject, but also into the apparent agent of the phrase, whereas the agent of the rule disappears:

(2) Mary *must not* tell the story.

The Polynesian language spoken in Tonga differs from English with regard to the fact that modal verbs do not exist and that there is not even a clear boundary between word categories such as verbs or nouns (Broschart, 1997). In addition, Tongan has an ergative alignment (Dixon, 1994; Tchekhoff, 1979): transitive phrases are not primarily based on a subject-object distinction but rather topicalize the event or the patient of an action.

This raises the following questions: How are deontic concepts such as ban and obligation lexicalised in Tongan? What characteristics emerge from differences in grammar and syntactical structure? How do these differences reflect the relationship between the deontic concepts and between agent and patient? Our paper primarily aims to analyze the deontic system in Tongan language and culture and its equivalence with that in other languages. We start by specifying *ban*, *obligation*, *permission*, and *release* and by showing that these concepts and their relations have psychological reality as mental models. We will then look at their linguistic expression, comparing it with two Indo-European languages (English and German). In order to understand some of the peculiarities of their use in a traditional Polynesian society, we will finally take into consideration the cultural origins and consequences of *tapu* in Tonga.

### The Cognitive Concepts

In order to compare deontic concepts cross-culturally, a set of structural features is required to define these concepts and to check equivalences (cf. Wierzbicka, 1992). Among these could be the number of and the relation between deontic concepts as well as the implications they have. With regard to social norms, four deontic concepts are typically distinguished: *ban*, *obligation*, *permission* and *release* (*from obligation*). They can be arranged in a so-called “deontic square of opposition” (see Figure 1), going back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The square defines relations between all pairs (cf. Anderson, 1956), which must hold in a *consistent* system of norms.

First, ban and obligation form a pair of *contraries*: at most only one of them may be in effect at any time since it is not possible for an action to be forbidden and obligatory simultaneously. This corresponds with our intuition that social rules must allow either an action to be taken or to be omitted. Further, ban and permission are interchangeable concepts. To be obligated to take an action, for example, implies that the omission of the action is forbidden. Second, ban and permission on the left side of the square, and obligation and release on the right are pairs of *contradicories*. Exactly one of each

pair is true in a particular situation: an action is either forbidden or allowed, and either obligatory or not. Third, from the contrary relation we know that a banned action cannot be obligatory. Instead its omission must be possible, that is, the action *need not* be done. Conversely, if an action is obligatory, then it cannot be banned but must be *permitted*. Along the diagonals of the square the top thus implies the bottom. These pairs are called *subalterns*. Finally, the concepts at the bottom of the square form a pair of *subcontraries*: at least one of them holds in each situation – an action *may* be taken if there is no ban, or it *needs not* to be taken if it is not obligatory – or both if no social rule at all is imposed.

Assuming that human behavior is socially unregulated in its ‘natural state’, ban and obligation appear to be the basic rules. Formulated as social norms, their main objective is to impose behavioral constraints that hold under certain conditions for certain people. Setting a norm thus requires two roles and a certain content, reflected linguistically in a three-place predicate:

(3) CAUSE-OBLIGE (x,y,p) [ag(x)  $\wedge$  pat(y[+anim])  $\wedge$  p]

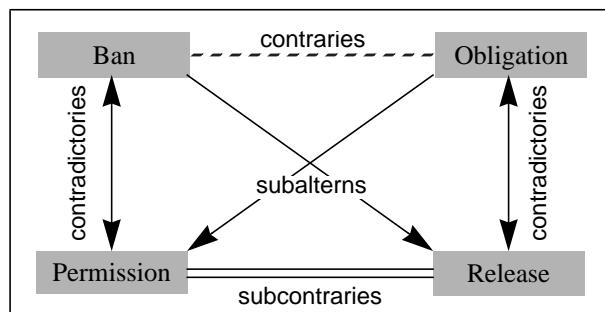
This predicate includes an agent (ag), a patient (pat), and the proposition (p) that is the topic of the rule (cf. Abraham, 2001). Note that while the patient is supposed to be animate, the agent need not be. In addition to their role as patients of a rule, people may also appear as agents with regard to the action constrained. In this role they need to know which behavioral constraints are implied by norms, that is, they need to infer what they ‘must’ or ‘may’ do in a particular situation.

Psychological experiments on deontic reasoning show that people, irrespective of language or culture, have a clear understanding of the social norms resulting, for instance, from promises or threats (Beller, Bender & KuhnMünch, in prep.). People are also very accurate in detecting rule violations (e.g., Beller, 2001; Cosmides, 1989; Holyoak & Cheng, 1995) and in inferring what must or may be done according to a given norm (Beller, 2003). These latter empirical findings suggest that people build mental models of social norms and use their implications flexibly and in accordance with the deontic square. It thus seems justified to use this square as a conceptual basis for analyzing how deontic concepts are reflected in different linguistic systems.

### Linguistic Expressions

In most Indo-European languages (such as English and German), social rules can be expressed as referring to the deontic concept itself (e.g., ‘ban’/‘Verbot’) or to the act of posing them (‘to forbid’/‘verbieten’). In addition, modals can be used to express their implications and focus on the person to whom a rule applies (‘somebody *must not* do something’/‘jemand darf etwas *nicht* tun’). Not all of these expressions, however, can be formulated in other languages, particularly with modal verbs. Even when comparing them in related languages such as English and German, differences become obvious.

Figure 1: The deontic square of opposition.



## Modal Verbs in German and English

Although modals in English and German derive from a common source, their present day usage differs with regard to at least two aspects (Abraham, 2001): contrary to English, German modals have retained their categorial polyfunctionality (as epistemics and deontics) and in particular their full deontic root load. In English, only ‘must’ and partly ‘may’ are still used deontically, but even these are increasingly substituted by ‘have to’ and ‘be permitted to’. When negated, modals switch differently (see Table 1): in English, the stronger rules *obligation* and *ban* are expressed with the same word, namely ‘must’ (negated in the second case), while the weaker rules *permission* and *release* take different terms: ‘may’ and ‘need not’. In German, mutually exclusive rules are expressed with one term each: *obligation* and *release* with ‘müssen’, *permission* and *ban* with ‘dürfen’ (both negated in the second case).

The crossing of terms for concepts focuses on different aspects of the square: the choice of one term for contrary concepts in English indicates a focus on the *necessity* implied by the rule, while in German same terms are used for *contradicting pairs* as the preferred relation. The crossing may also be due to a difference in scope. In German, the modal is under the scope of the negation – the deontic rule itself is then negated:

(4) Er *muß* gehen [It is *necessary* that he goes]. —  
Er *muß nicht* gehen [It is *not necessary* that he goes].

In English, it rather seems as if the negation were under the scope of the modal verb, for instance:

(5) He *must* go [It is *necessary* that he goes]. —  
He *must not* go [It is *necessary* that he does *not* go].

Differences in the expression of deontic concepts may be even more salient when crossing the boundary of language families and looking at equivalents in Tongan.

## Deontic Concepts in Tongan

With regard to the concepts themselves and the act of posing them, Tongan offers apparently similar options for phrasing, with the exception that nouns and verbs overlap to a certain degree (Broschart, 1997). Modal verbs, however, do not exist, and in order to express the implication for the person to whom a rule applies, one needs to use indirect constructions.

**Table 1:** Deontic modals in English and German (the diverging distribution of ‘must’/‘müssen’ regarding strong vs. weak formulation is highlighted).

	English		German	
formulation	positive	negative	positive	negative
strong	must	must not	müssen	nicht dürfen
weak	may	need not	dürfen	nicht müssen

**Table 2:** Prohibiting in German, English, and Tongan.

German	English	Tongan
verbieten	{ to forbid to prohibit }	tapui
verboten	{ forbidden prohibited }	tapu (‘ikai ngofua)
Verbot	ban	

The concept of ban is expressed with the adjective/intransitive verb/noun ‘tapu’. The original meaning of ‘tapu’ included, among other things, ‘prohibiting, forbidden, unlawful, sacred, holy’:

(6) 'Oku *tapu* ['a] e 'alu ta'e kofu ['i] he hala 'i Tonga.  
(lit. ‘It is *forbidden* the going without clothing on a road in Tonga.’)

Although formulations with *tapu* are perfectly acceptable, many Tongans seem to prefer indirect formulations with the negated contradictory ‘ikai ngofua’:

(6a) He *'ikai ngofua* ['a] e 'alu ta'e kofu ['i] he hala 'i Tonga.  
(lit. ‘It is *not allowed* the going without clothing on a road in Tonga.’)

This may be due to the fact that in certain contexts ‘tapu’ is regarded as too strong. Deontically, however, both formulations are equivalent. The act of posing a ban can be expressed, for instance, by adding the suffix *i* for transitive verbs, thus obtaining ‘tapui’ (‘to forbid’).

Despite the grammatical differences between both languages, the rule and its posing can be translated without major divergence (see Table 2). What cannot be made analogously in Tongan is the construction with a modal verb. The English modal phrase

(7) The boy *must not* touch his father’s head  
will again be translated with reference to the concept:

(7a) He *'ikai ngofua* ke ala ['a] e tamasi'i ki he 'ulu 'o 'ene tamai.  
(lit. ‘It is *not allowed* that is being touched by the boy [to] the head of his father.’)

(7) and (7a) differ not only according to the use or lack of modals, but also with regard to word order, relationship between agent and patient, and its ergative construction. Before we highlight these differences in the next section, let us briefly look at the other deontic concepts: permission, obligation, and release (see Table 3).

The term that fits best as the opposite or, more precisely, as the contradictory of ‘tapu’ is ‘ngofua’:

(8) 'E *ngofua* pe ke ke va'inga, kaikehe, 'e *'ikai ngofua* ke ke ngaue ['i] he 'aho Sapaté.  
(lit. ‘It is *allowed* that you play, however, it is *not allowed* that you work on a Sunday.’)

**Table 3:** Tongan Deontic Terms.

Deontic Concept/Rule	Act of Posing Rule	Implication
English	Tongan	
ban	<i>tapu</i>	<i>tapui</i>
permission	<i>ngofua</i>	<i>fakangofua</i>
obligation	<i>fatongia</i>	<i>fakamo'ua / fakafatongia</i>
release	<i>faka'ata</i>	<i>tuku'ange</i>
		<i>'ikai fiema'u</i>

The transitive verb in the sense of ‘allowing’ is derived by affixing *faka-* as in the following example:

(9) 'Oku *fakangofua* 'e Tēvita 'a Mele ke ne fakahoko [a] e talanoá.  
(‘David allows Mary to tell the story.’)

While in general, *ngofua* is the opposite of *tapu* in a contradictory pair, a second type of permission is lexicalised. Distinguished from a state in which something is usually allowed (*ngofua*) is the state where something was forbidden before but from which the ban has been removed. In this second case, the proper term depends on the particular *tapu* removed – ‘fu’ia’, for instance, is used for removing *tapu* five days after a funeral, ‘fu’ipa’ for the same act after ten days, and ‘fakamalele’ refers to lifting all restrictions imposed after a death.

Permission can also be indicated by the term ‘*faka'ata*’, which denotes ‘removing restrictions, permitting, allowing’. It also means ‘removing any rules at all’ and thus has a close connection to the release concept.

Two words exist for ‘obligation’, depending on the context or connotation. The first, ‘*mo'ua*’, refers to ‘being encumbered, busy, or indebted’, while the second, ‘*fatongia*’, is an obligation in the sense of duty. Although ‘*fatongia*’ would be the preferred term, ‘*mo'ua*’ contributes to derived forms of obligation as well, such as ‘*fakamo'ua*’ (‘to obligate’). An interesting connotation of ‘*mo'ua*’ is ‘suffering as the result of breaking a prohibition’. In order to express implications from the rule (corresponding to a modal phrase), a change in terms is required from ‘*fatongia*’ to ‘*pau*’:

(10) Kuo *pau* ke u 'alu.  
(‘I must go’, lit. ‘It has been *decided* that I go.’)

Basically carrying the epistemic meaning ‘certain, decided, necessary, inevitable’, *pau* is also used to help convey the deontic sense of ‘must’. In addition, sentences with *pau* can be phrased in correspondence to a negation of the English type (resulting in a ban), as in:

(11) Kuo *pau* ke 'oua te tau fai ha me'a pehē.  
(‘We must not do any such thing’,  
i.e., ‘We must *refrain* from doing any such thing.’)

To sum up, the Tongan deontic terms are indeed related to each other in accordance with the relationship defined within the deontic square: negated contradicto-

ries are used as equivalents, as when terms used for bans (“*ikai ngofua*”) explicitly refer to the permission concept; in other cases semantic connections do exist. And the term for release (‘*faka'ata*’), with its connotation ‘free from any rule’, expands into the sphere of permission. It is remarkable that even without polyfunctional modals, most equivalent expressions in Tonga carry the semantic polyfunctionality of deontic and epistemic reading as well, particularly ‘*ngofua*’ and ‘*pau*’.

## Agent and Patient

While the phrasing of deontic concepts and rules and the act of posing these rules can be carried out correspondingly in Tongan (yet with semantically conditioned exceptions), one particular transformation cannot be made analogously, and that refers to modals. If we return to (7) and (7a), we can elucidate significant differences between English modal phrases and their Tongan equivalents.

Assuming, as does the Tongan scholar Futa Helu, that “the earlier the position of an idea in the normal syntax of sentences the more important it is” (1999, p. 189), we can conclude that English (and German) put considerable emphasis on the actor, while in Tongan the action itself is more significant. As indicated by the word order in (7a), the focus here would thus be on the *concept* itself (i.e., on the ban) and on the action that is forbidden rather than on the person – either agent or patient. In English (7), the focus is at least as much on the patient (the one to whom the rule applies) as it is on the rule itself.

This focus is further reflected in the predominantly ergative alignment of Tongan. An ergative construction gives prominence to topic or event rather than subject (cf. Duranti, 1994; Tchekhoff, 1979). The focus of Tongan phrases thus remains on the rule, whereas in English – with the choice of a rule formulation, as in (1), or its modal implication (2) – one of either parties of the rule (agent or patient) will be focused upon. The construction with a modal verb transforms the patient of a rule, for instance the boy in (7), into the subject (and agent) of the implication phrase. In Tongan (7a), on the other hand, the boy is not the subject, but the agent of an action that is the topic of the rule. Consequently, while Indo-European languages (at least English and German) tend to focus on single persons as agents or patients, Tongan formulations, with the prominence they give to topic, rather reflect certain aspects of a situation.

However, more than the linguistic expression, it is the rule itself that topicalizes relation. We therefore need to turn to the cultural context in order to gain a full comprehension.

## Cultural Context

If we wish to understand *tapu* as the defining rule of the Tongan deontic system, we need to look more thoroughly at its religious origins and social consequences.

## Origins and Consequences of *Tapu*

The term ‘*tapu*’ means ‘forbidden or prohibited’ and is still widely used in this sense today. Traditionally, however, its semantics included also, and essentially, ‘sacredness’ – a meaning that at first glance seems incompatible with our notion of prohibition (cf. Shore, 1989). The ‘*Tohi Tapu*’ (the Bible) is the ‘holy book’ rather than the ‘forbidden book’; yet the latter would have to be translated in just the same way, as ‘*tohi tapu*’.

Something being *tapu* in the sense of ‘forbidden’ was rather a consequence of its being sacred, that is, loaded with the supernatural power *mana*. *Mana*, a core concept of Polynesian worldview, contained a broad spectrum of meanings: it implied or induced prestige, influence, supernatural power, or luck. It could be loaded like energy and was attributed to people, animals, things, or actions. With people, it was particularly the higher ranking who were endowed with *mana* (Lehmann, 1930). The contact between people of different rank was regarded as dangerous for both sides and therefore strictly regulated by avoidance rules, the *tapu* (Shore, 1989).

This connection between *mana* and *tapu* explains why two types of permission needed to be distinguished: one generally permissible (*ngofua*) and one permissible after the removal of restrictions. The first category concerned the sphere of little *mana*, thus not dangerous for anybody, while the second category was marked by great *mana* and therefore first needed to be de-sacralized. Several *tapu* applied, for instance, during times of death and funeral (particularly prone to *mana*), others during pregnancy and lactation. Most *tapu*, however, were concerned with social contact (Gifford, 1929; Lehmann, 1930; Shore, 1989).

According to the Tongan *fahu* principle, sisters are higher in rank (*eiki*) than their brothers, older people are higher than younger people, and nobles are higher than commoners. Among the relationships restricted by *tapu* were therefore those between brothers and sisters, between women and their sisters-in-law, and in particular between fathers and their children. The restraint that marks their relationship involves physical separation: children were not allowed to sit in their father’s lap, use his belongings, eat his leftover food or, as stated in the introductory example, touch his head (Gifford, 1929; Morton, 1996). The latter example is prototypical for the protecting objective of many *tapu* by preventing the most dangerous act: to touch the head where *mana* is concentrated.

## Agent and Patient in Tongan *Tapu*

Not only was *mana* the legitimization of a *tapu*, it was also its source and, in a sense, even its *agent*. Although in certain cases a *tapu* could be imposed by religious specialists, the causative force lay in the *tapu* itself. A *tapu* thus did not need to be looked after by any kind of authority, but was regarded as being capable of protecting itself (Lehmann, 1930; Martin, 1991). Conse-

quently, the Tongan language provides a number of terms for consequences of breaking a *tapu*: ‘*fula*’, for instance, denotes the swelling up as the result of eating food left over by a chief; ‘*hangatāmaki*’ refers to an abscess or carbuncle caused by breaking a *tapu* on a tree; and scented oil was considered to be spoilt (‘*talai*’) if the woman preparing it had broken a *tapu*.

With regard to the structure for social rules (3), a Tongan phrase always retains the predicate pattern: the commonly known source of *tapu* used to be the obliging part or agent, the proposition is the restricted action, and the patient are those to whom this restriction applies (usually lower ranking people). Therefore, in a sentence such as

(12) 'Oku *tapu* ke ala ['a] e tamasi'i ki he 'ulu 'o 'ene tamaí.  
(lit. ‘It is *tapu* that is being touched by the boy [to] the head of his father.’)

the agent of the *tapu* is *mana*, possessed by the father and concentrated in his head, whereas the topic of the *tapu* is the restricted action, and the person who would be the agent of this action, namely the boy, is the (only implicit) patient. In the English modal equivalent (7) the party imposing the rule completely disappears. Agreeing with Abraham (2001, p.19f.) that root modals are causatives involving at least a covert agent, we would thus argue that this agent is *responsible* for the obligation. Instead, the subject (the boy) is suggested to be responsible as agent. Even when retranslating the Tongan phrase into:

(13) It is *not allowed* that the boy touches his father’s head.  
it still seems plausible that the ban has more to do with the boy than anything regarding the father or his head.

Summing up the relationship between Tongan deontic concepts, both ban and permission had to do with *mana*: having *mana* made sacred and thus required avoidance (both aspects of *tapu*); equal or low *mana* did not and resulted in *ngofua*. As with *tapu*, the obligation *fatongia* resulted from a difference in rank: traditionally, *fatongia* denoted the enforced labor of commoners for chiefs, but its meaning has extended to the duties and correct behavior in social relations, including attitudes and emotions such as obedience, love (‘*ofa*’), or respect (Morton, 1996). Accordingly, agent of the *fatongia* were the high ranking.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Taking into consideration the relational information hidden in Tongan possessive classes supports this interpretation. All words to which a possessive can be applied belong to either the ‘*e*-’ or ‘*ho*-class. As Bennardo (2000) showed, this distinction reflects the direction of the relationship: *originating* from the possessor (*e*-class) vs. *towards* the possessor (*ho*-class). Accordingly, ‘*hoku fatongia*’ (‘my duty’) is conceived of as the duty *imposed on me* while ‘*eku tapu*’ (‘my ban’) rather refers to an intrinsic feature or *internalized* duty. The agent of the rule would thus need no further expression.

## Discussion

When the term ‘taboo’ entered the vocabulary of European languages, it was used in the sense of ‘strictly forbidden’, and lacked the notion of ‘sacred’ that was an essential part of the Polynesian concept of *tapu*. With the increasing influence and success of Christian missionaries during the 19th century, this religiously motivated use of the term even diminished in Tonga itself. And although some of the old *tapu* are still in practice, most are not. The head *tapu*, for instance – preventing the dangerous contact of lower-ranking children with the *mana* concentrated in their father’s head – is adhered to by less and less families (Morton, 1996). Although *tapu* no longer implies sacredness in its practical use, its semantic load still conveys this reading, and people hesitate to call a prohibition a *tapu* if they consider the term too strong or not appropriate in a profane context. In various cases (cf. 6a and 8) a paraphrase is preferred, nowadays even for the head *tapu* (7a).

Despite this additional reading, the deontic concepts expressed in English and Tongan are comparable and fit equally well into the deontic square. They differ, however, with regard to the ranking of action over actor and of patient over agent. If grammar is seen as an index of culture that “represents standardized judgments or conventions on the environment” and that “reveals a charter of morality [...], i.e. a set of rules or beliefs for behavior of the people who speak a language” (Helu, 1999, p. 188; see also Duranti, 1994), then these linguistic characteristics of Tongan should reveal at least a certain concept of agency. If this is the case, it should also have consequences on more complex cognitive processes, for instance on attribution patterns, on emotion-eliciting appraisals, or on conflict management.

The question of psychological reality still remains open. Whether these differences do mould deontic mental models or the perception of agency and how they relate to actual behavior has to be accounted for empirically. Some findings from previous research on a different topic indicate that people in Tonga tend not to hold agents as responsible for action outcomes as those in Western cultures do. Instead, they seem to make stronger attributions to situational factors than personal ones and also appear to react with anger less often than Europeans (Beller, Bender & Kuhnmünch, in prep.). Eventually conflicts are reduced (Bender, 2001) – and that may very well be due to the fact that people are less often topicalized as agents in daily talk.

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