The Loss and Transformation of the Tongan Culture and its Effect on Tongan American families in Utah

The process of acculturation has resulted in the loss and transformation of the Tongan culture, values and traditions. Several Tongan customs and traditions have been altered or neglected in order for Tongans to conform to the American way of life. This modification of the Tongan culture has impacted the Tongan American born generation and has contributed to a loss of Tongan identity. The reconstruction and neglect of Tongan values has inevitably affected the younger American born generation and has contributed to social ills among the Tongan American communities such as gangs, the breakdown of the family structure, the lack of respect between the youth and elders and many young Tongans not succeeding or advancing in the American educational system. These issues, which were once foreign to Tongans in the islands, are now becoming acceptable behavior among the younger Tongan American generations. There is a growing concern among many Tongan Americans that the Tongan culture will become lost and that the younger generation will lose a sense of their cultural identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of anga’ fakatonga1 (the Tongan way) has become indigenous as early immigrants have become merged into the American way of living. Many elements of the Tongan culture have become lost, while others have become transformed and reconstructed through “cultural compromise.”

“There is a widespread concern that ‘anga fakatonga’ (the Tongan way) is being lost and that younger generations, especially those growing up overseas, will therefore lose their cultural identity. Will young Tongans overseas be ‘Tongan’ only by virtue of their genetic inheritance, or will they continue to identify culturally as Tongan? If they do the latter, which elements of being Tongan will they consider important? (Morton Lee, 2003, 2)?”

Anga fakatonga is the Tongan way of life that is based on love and generosity which are expressed by helping the family and by altruistically assisting or giving of goods or time to help extended family members, friends and the community. Anga’ fakatonga is a fundamental attitude and behavior that is taught to Tongan children and is expected to be practiced and passed to their children as well. Anga’ fakatonga is proclaimed as 'ulungaanga o e fonua or anga fakafonua: The way of the land and the people (Morton, 1996, 20).

The Tongan way of life (Anga’ fakatonga) is a defining element of the Tongan identity. In Tonga Anga fakatonga has respectfully been passed on to each succeeding Tongan generation for centuries. However, the passing down and teaching of the culture has declined between the first Tongan American migrant generations to the younger American born generations. Many of these younger Tongan Americans range from young teenagers to adults with children. Thus, the lack of Tongan cultural awareness instilled in many of these Tongan American adults has led to a little or none of Tongan culture handed down to their own children. There is a growing concern with asserting the strength and importance of “Tongan Culture” which has been accompanied and to some extent motivated by growing fears of a weakening or even loss of the culture. Much of this concern has become a critical site for contestation, construction, and reconstruction of Tongan identity (Morton, 1996, 22).

What constitutes being Tongan and living the Tongan way are questions that frequently emerge in Tongan communities abroad. This question has become apparent due to the cultural loss that has transpired throughout the Tongan American Diasporas as a result of Tonga assimilation to the American culture. Although, many sociologist and anthropologist in academia will argue that it is natural for immigrants to experience various degrees of cultural loss and transformation in the process of adaptation and assimilation to their host culture. “The designation of what was true Tongan custom, and

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1 Anga fakatonga: Being Tongan in nature, disposition or custom.
what was to be abandoned, was the outcome of selective and highly interested negotiations on the part of leading Tongans and Europeans alike, overt or covert, in a concert or in opposition to one another (Cited by Morton, James, 1992, 99).” It was expected by American society that Tongan immigrants to acquire a basic knowledge of the American culture and was essential for them to conform in order to become part of the American society as a whole. Conformity to the American culture entails the acquisition of speaking the English language, obtaining a job to become part of the American working class, and living among a community of non-Tongan neighbors. Daily interaction and contact between Tongan migrants and Americans aided in the process of adaptation to the American culture. For many Tongan Americans, living the American way of life meant leaving the Tongan way behind.

Many Tongan Americans have become transformed by the American way of life that they no longer abide by the Tongan way of life. There are several American values that conflict with the Tongan way of life. For example, in America individuals strive for increased material comfort and individual success, contrary to the Tongan way of life, which emphasizes living within ones, means and working not only for individual success, but for ones family and community. The desire to pursue the American way has encouraged Tongans to adopt a “nationalistic” American attitude that leads many Tongan Americans to believe that the American way of life is the best and to distrust “un-American” behavior. This attitude is often displayed by young Tongan Americans who mock and satirize recent Tongan migrants who are labeled FOB’s, which stands for “fresh off the boat.” The use of the term FOB is a way of looking down on un-Americanized Tongan immigrants and is a perpetuation of this “nationalistic” attitude.

Anga fakatonga emphasizes most highly the importance of family more than any other, but also stresses the importance of kinship, community, respect, discipline, generosity, loyalty, and obedience to parents, elders and authority. The priority and importance of these values has become challenged by American values which emphasize the importance of material comfort, competitive-oriented achievement and success, individualism, and independence. The complexities and pressures of living in America has influenced Tongans to conform to these American values, which has resulted in cultural compromise and neglect. “Cultural compromise” is a state in which traditions and values are transformed by the new social conditions in which they exist. The transformation of these essential Tongan values has inevitably affected the younger American born generation and has contributed to a loss of Tongan identity and social ills that are apparent within Tongan families and communities.

This research project is important because there is limited research available concerning Pacific Islander cultural conflicts in America. This research will focus primarily on Tongans who migrated to Utah and the cultural conflicts they have experienced living in America. The number of Tongans in Utah has expanded rapidly over the last couple decades. Despite this rapid growth, Tongan Americans are considered to be an underrepresented population in Utah, because their populations are considerably small compared to other racial groups such as Whites and Latinos. In 2000 the U.S. Census
Bureau reported the Utah population to be 2,233,160 in which 1,992,975 were White and only 6,587 were Tongan. Tongans make up only .3 percent of the Utah population, which is reason why Tongans have remained an invisible population within Utah and the United States. Perhaps Tongans have remained invisible considering that Tongans are fairly new immigrants to the United States, with only a few migrating to the U.S. before the 1970’s.

**TONGAN MIGRATION TO UTAH**

Why did Tongans leave their island homes and loved ones to travel millions of miles across the Pacific Ocean to a foreign land? Were Tongans no longer satisfied with what Tongan life had to offer? Did they succumb to change and did they become co-opted by the promises of Western “high-life” that they could no longer abide by the Tongan customs and ways? Many older Tongans, who were the earliest migrants to Utah, will speak of their journeys here to America and what great sacrifices it involved. Some sold all their assets in order to pay for their family travel expenses, while others who were involved with the LDS church were provided with the opportunity to migrate. From all these stories has emerged a reoccurring theme, which speaks of opportunity, education and religion.

There were also other factors that contributed to the desire for many Tongans to migrate. One of which was a land shortage, which was occurring back in Tonga. Land shortages had occurred due to the rapid growth of the island population, resulting in a decrease of agricultural land and produce, which was one of the primary sources of income and sustenance for Tongan families. This decrease in land and income forced many Tongans to pursue other means of income though low wage employment in areas of labor, selling of crafts and tapa cloth and other intermittent temporal jobs. Unemployment, low wages and sparing incomes, combined with limited educational opportunities encouraged Tongans to consider venturing to America.

A small number of Tongans migrated to America around the mid 1950’s. The number of Tongan immigrants was low due to American immigration policies that favored European migrants. In 1965, this immigration policy was replaced by the Hart-Celler Act which allowed non-Europeans with the opportunity to immigrate. A preference system was established to encourage the reunification of families and a new visa category was introduced. This change made it easier for Tongans to migrate to the United States. Many Tongans began to migrate by family units and become part of the “wave” of new immigrants around the 1960s. This wave of new Tongan immigrants was increased by the LDS church, which provided LDS converts in Tonga with funded travel to the United States. The opportunity to migrate through the LDS church encouraged many Tongan families to settle in Salt Lake City, Utah (Mormon Church headquarters) so they could raise their children in the LDS church.

Tongan migration continued throughout the 1970’s and 1990’s. Many Tongans settled in states such as California, Hawaii, Washington, Texas and Utah. A large number of Tongans settled in Utah, primarily in the Salt Lake Valley. The settlement of early

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2 Tapa cloth: Fine mat made by the flattening and beating of a tree bark.
migrants encouraged more Tongans to migrate to Utah. New Tongan migrants stayed in the homes of earlier migrants until they could find employment and obtain a home of their own. These recent Tongan migrants found work doing labor intensive jobs such as yard work, construction, warehouse assembly and manufacturing, and were also employed in other service sectors such as housekeeping and janitorial work. These occupations offered minimum wages but were crucial in order for these Tongans to establish a living of their own. They also had obligations to their families back in Tonga who were awaiting remittances and goods.

TONGAN FAMILIES IN UTAH

Tongan families in Utah settled on the Westside of the Salt Lake Valley, in areas that included Glendale, Rose Park, West Valley, Kearns and a few were scattered among the Avenues. These areas, aside from the Avenues, are middle class areas that appealed to early Tongan migrants due to the low cost of housing. Early Tongan migrants began to settle in these areas, which encourage more Tongans to settle over time. The development of Tongan communities has expanded throughout Salt Lake valley and in other areas such as Sandy, Riverton, South Jordan, Ogden and Logan. However, the greatest number of Tongans is visible on the Westside areas of Salt Lake.

Tauhi Vaha’a is a Tongan concept defined as a vow to maintain family and community ties. The literal meaning of this concept is similar to the golden rule, “Do unto others, as you would like done unto you” or “If I take care of you, you take care of me.” In Tonga, particularly in the villages, when families were in need of money, food or other commodities, or help in the home they would turn to their fellow villagers. Village neighbors were like unto their own family. A Tongan woman explained in a church meeting that Tongan families were very poor back then and they gave all they had to help each other. It was considered an act of shame if one did not maintain their obligation to their family and community. Such selfish and greed is deviant to the Tongan way of life.

The purpose of Tauhi Vaha’a is to preserve the Tongan culture from outside influences and maintain solidarity within the family and the community. This vow of selflessness and altruism is invoked upon Tongan children at an early age and was carried over to America by early immigrants. Living out this notion was somewhat of a challenge for Tongan migrants in Utah who were surrounded by a majority of non-Tongan and some Tongan neighbors. A majority of their non-Tongan neighbors were palangi (Tongan reference to a White person(s)) who were very receptive to their arrivals in the neighborhood. However, there were obvious lines drawn between neighbors that were intended to maintain privacy and property security. This discouraged many Tongans from borrowing, asking for help or welcoming their neighbors into their homes. The dependence on families and neighbors depended on back home has become fractured.

The community and family ties manifested through Tauhi Vaha’a had become challenged by this American notion of community, individualism, family exclusiveness, privacy and isolationism. Many Tongans began to adopt this way of life as they became submerged
into the American culture. Although some families in Utah still maintain this concept of “Tauhi Vaha’a” through family networks, religious organizations, and school associations, but as a community in whole this concept has become diluted. The weakening and breakage of community ties is evident. Some Tongan Americans have rejected their obligations to help their families and communities to become fully occupied in their individual pursuits to achieve individual success. Tongan Americans have become consumed by the American value system, which encourages competitiveness and places much value on gaining material comforts, individual power, prestige and wealth. This pursuit for individual gain has led many Tongan Americans to adopt a Western attitude that finds the constant demands of the extended family demanding (Morton Lee, 2003, 99). The priority and importance of Tauhi Vaha’a has been replaced by the American values of material comfort, competitive-oriented achievement and success, individualism, and independence.

Tongan communities often praise the success and advancement of young Tongan Americans, who are encouraged set goals, work hard and be successful. “However, the quest for socioeconomic success can in itself cause rivalry as families vie for recognition for their achievements in their new country. At the same time they have to be careful to avoid accusations of being fie palangi (acting like Anglo-Europeans) or fie ma ‘olunga (acting above oneself) (Morton Lee, 2003, 47).” Successful Tongan Americans have an obligation to young Tongan Americans who struggle in a society of “White” privilege, by helping them to access a college education or acquire employment. The American culture places much of this responsibility on the immediate family and educational system. But with so many Tongan parents who are overly occupied by work to provide for their families, it is critical that Tongan community leaders carry out their obligations to these young Tongan Americans by setting examples and empowering them to become successful. It is also inherent that Tongan families teach their children about their obligations to give back to their families and community.

Tauhi vaha’a is a vow that holds Tongan families together. Family is of the utmost importance in the Tongan culture. Values of love and concern (ofa’), respect (faka ap’a ap’a’) and obedience (talangafua) are taught within the close-knit structures of the Tongan family. Tongan kinship is not merely based on the nuclear family, but also includes extended family members such as aunts, uncles and cousins. This concept of Tongan kinship is still maintained by Tongan families in Utah and is further supported by the notion of families encouraged by the LDS Church. Tongan families along with extended families unite in times of crisis, loss and celebrations. Family members give one another economic and other support (Morton, 1996, 26). When a kavenga’ (family obligation or burden such as a wedding or funeral) occurs, a Tongan family will present the family involved in the occasion with a tokonaki’ (money and food) and koloa’ (Gifts that include tapa cloth, woven mats and gift baskets). The presentation of tokonaki’ and koloa’ to the family is a demonstration of respect between families.

For families in Utah this tradition has changed in many ways due Tongan membership in the LDS church. Several Tongan traditions such as faka’ pale and the giving of koloa have been discouraged by the LDS church. Faka’ pale is a Tongan tradition of
fundraising which involves the donation of money, which is placed on a Tongan dancer who performs a *ta'alunga*. The tradition of *faka pale* is performed at Tongan weddings, birthdays, and celebrations. The collection of the money is often donated to the wedding couple, birthday individual, to a church or to those in need of funding for trips and upcoming events. However, many LDS church leaders have discouraged this tradition from being held in the church. LDS church leaders perceive this tradition as a financial burden on Tongan families who lead themselves into debt in order to fund these types of events. The same discouraged attitude has been imposed upon the elaborate giving of *koloa*. LDS Church leaders believe these traditions to be of good intent, however see the financial burdens that are posed on families which can be detrimental to the health and well being of the children. Many Tongan Americans agree with the counsels of these leaders because they see these changes to Tongan tradition necessary to suit the current times. Many LDS Tongan Americans believe the family to come first before all else.

Tongan families travel great distances to show their respect and support at weddings, funerals and celebrations. These events are high priority, which is a cause for some Tongans to put off their work and educational responsibilities to attend these occasions. Such behavior is difficult for many Americans to understand and is condemned as irresponsible or indolent type of behavior. Although many Tongans will argue that it is an inherent obligation and mandatory for them to attend. The selfless act of giving up ones time and responsibilities to come to the aid of a fellow family member is a norm in the Tongan culture. For instance, if a family funeral occurs Tongan families will unite, and will mourn at the home of the surviving family members for a couple days or even a week. During this time, extended family members travel great distances, arriving at the home to cook daily meals and distribute plates of food to a family members who visit the home to present *koloa* (Tapa cloth, woven mats, quilts, and baskets) to show their respect to the family in loss. It is customary that all family members are dressed down in all black clothing and a *pule taha* (Tongan mats worn around the waist). Traditions performed in Tongan funerals are complex and have many historical implications. The practice of these customs and traditions are perceived by many Americans to be unusual and divergent from American culture.

**RESPECT**

The central point of anga fakatonga is respect. “An overwhelming majority of Tongan identity ‘respect’, *faka ‘apa ‘apa’,* as the core of anga’ fakatonga (the Tongan way) and is the most crucial aspect to be retained and passed down tot future generations (Morton Lee, 2003, 95).” Respect is a basis for all Tongan relationships. Within the Tongan family, children display their love (ofa’) to their family through obedience and conformity to the orders and counsels of their parents and elders. Speaking up or against their parents or elders’ council is a form of utmost disrespect and is an act of shame, usually punishable by physical discipline. Many Tongans perceive this method of discipline to be an act of love and is a way of enforcing respect in the home.

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4 *Ta’alunga:*

5 *Pule taha*: Tongan mats worn around the waist.
This form of discipline is considered abuse by American standards. A Detroit news columnist interviewed a Samoan gentleman by the name of Lee Moe, a parent of three children contended, “Back home, if you get a licking from your teacher, you go home and get another licking from your parents. Here, you lay a hand on your kids, you land in jail. What are you left with? Nothing. All you can do is talk to your kids, and kids don’t listen just to talking.” Many Tongans agree with Mr. Moe’s argument, furthering contending that the American way of disciplining their children is ineffective and in some cases is necessary to utilize physical discipline for their children learn. Physical discipline along with the incorporation of dialogue has been widely used by Tongan Americans to ensure a sense of respect and obedience in the home. Teaching through discipline is also intended to discourage their children from straying into the deviant paths of society, such as gangs, drugs and incarceration to name a few.

GANGS

Despite traditional Tongan discipline, many young Tongan Americans have strayed into the path of gangs. “Harsh physical punishment, as well as parents’ strictness and lack of communication with their children, are commonly blamed for some young Tongans’ involvement with gangs (Morton Lee, 2003, 166). The number of Tongan gang members in Utah is astounding. Gang activity has become a dilemma among many Tongan communities due to the multiplicity of Tongan gangs that have developed throughout the Salt Lake Valley. According to the Salt Lake Area Gang Project there are approximately 354 documented Pacific Islander gang members and eighty-six percent of them are between the ages of 20-29. Tongan gang activity has resulted in violent acts that have claimed the lives of many young Tongan Americans. This notion of Tongans harming and killing other Tongans is a difficult concept to conceive, considering the rich Tongan heritage in which they have come from which emphasizes the importance of kinship, community, unity and solidarity.

Some Tongan American parents are well aware of their child’s involvement with gangs, but others are in denial. The parents overwhelming obligations to provide for their family has forced them to work long hours at menial, low paying jobs, giving them little time to engage and interact with their children. The limited time available to spend with their children has resulted in a lack of communication and a breakdown of the family structure, which has encouraged many young Tongan Americans to spend more time with relatives and friends. Eventually, venturing out into the streets and becoming involved in gang life. Many Tongan American parents will argue that they are working to provide for the family which is often unappreciated and taken for granted by their young children who chose to run the streets, wasting time, while they should maintain their obligations to help in the home. The duties to help in the home are an inherent obligation instilled within the Tongan culture. This obligation and vow manifested through Tauhi Vaha’a to help the family has become infringed upon by the pursuits of these young Tongan Americans who seek to leave the home, becoming involved in a dead end quest.
A lack of identity and a loss of cultural identity among these young Tongan Americans can be traced back to their families. Joining gangs may be a response to the family problems and cultural alienation they are experiencing (Morton Lee, 2003, 169). The decline in teaching of the culture within Tongan American families can be attributed to this conflict of identity. Young Tongan Americans have discovered a sense of Tongan identity by joining Tongan gangs. Becoming part of a Tongan gang has empowered young Tongans alike with a sense of Tongan pride. This pride is exhibited among Tongans who lash out against each other through gun violence and physical assault in their attempts to prove their strength and non-existent fear.

**EDUCATION**

The involvement of Tongans in gang life has contributed to an increase in high school drop outs. Other factors include a lack of motivation and obligations to work and provide for the family. The lack of motivation was a common reason given by many young Tongan Americans who attended a Pacific Islander educational conference in 2003. Many of these young Tongan Americans grew up in a working class family that expected them to finish high school and obtain employment to help pay the bills and put food on the table. Their obligations to the family are crucial, considering the fact that many of these Tongan families were living in poverty despite the long hours of work put in by each parent. For many of these young Tongans, it was devastating and difficult to watch their families struggle as they attended school. Their overwhelmingly concern with their family financial struggles drew much of their focuses away from school. Many of these young Tongans left high school to find employment. The financial contributions of these young Tongan Americans became crucial to the financial standing of their families. Many of these young Tongan Americans put their education on hold and some never returned.

This lack of motivation has become apparent through the attitudes and behaviors of young Tongans in the Salt Lake school district. According to the Salt Lake Board of education, the high school drop out rates for Pacific Islanders is 2 to 1 and the continuation of education following high school graduation has become dismissed by many young Tongans. Instead of continuing their education, many of these young Tongans plan on joining the general workforce. The decision to follow in this path for many will result in a recycle of the struggles and limited opportunity that their parents faced, due to the lack in skill and education. However, many of these young Tongan Americans do not realize the limitation and struggles that will come about due to their lack of education. Among Tongan community leaders is a sense of disappointment as many encourage these young Tongan Americans to invest in an education and service, which will provide them with a promising future of opportunity.

It is vital that community leaders, parents and young Tongans in higher education help build a foundation for these young Tongan Americans. These young Tongan Americans are the future leaders of the Tongan communities and the American nation. It is imperative that these young Tongan Americans build their future around education, which will provide them with the opportunity to provide a better living for their families and will enable them to contribute their knowledge and guidance to their Tongan
communities. In Utah, this sense of leadership, guidance and mentoring is a mission that many young Tongan Americans in higher education have committed to fulfilling. The University of Utah Pacific Islander Student Association is comprised of students who have experienced the similar struggles and troubles, and are well aware of the obstacles that are preventing them from pursuing a college education. Many of these University students realize their obligations to give back to their community by encouraging these young Tongans to pursue a college education and to give back to the community, fulfilling the notion of Tauhi Vaha’a.

**CONCLUSION**

Many Tongans were attracted to Utah by the promises of economic opportunities and better educations for their children. However, some Tongans contend that such promises have not been fulfilled, considering the number of Tongan gang members, lack of parent involvement in the home, disrespect in the homes and among Tongan communities and the increase in High School dropouts; attributing the loss of the Tongan culture to many of these societal ills. “It is possible that these behaviors are children’s way of reminding us and that the dominant White society that they adamantly and resolutely oppose being deprived of their native cultural heritage (Kai’ili, 1997, 7)” Conformity to ‘White’ American society has forced many Tongans to leave behind the Tongan way. Thus, encouraging Tongan parents to withdraw from teaching their Tongan children essential values and customs that they were once taught. Leaving their children with little else to identify with, but the American culture.

It is difficult to understand young Tongan Americans who claim Tongan heritage, but have little or not knowledge of the Tongan language, traditions, and customs. It is even more disappointing to observe Tongan parents that deny their children the opportunity to learn about the Tongan culture. If this pattern holds true, their own children will have little or nothing to hand down to their own children. What is to come for their grand children? These children may identify themselves as being Tongan, yet they will lack a true sense of Tongan identity. Hence, in order to preserve the Tongan culture it is critical that parents teach their children about the culture in the homes. Most importantly, teaching Tongan values of love, generosity, respect, family and community to their children at an early age. It is the Tongan values that have held together a Tongan nation, villages and families. These are also the values that will secure Tongan American families.
REFERENCES


