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Hafekasi: The History, Identity & Cultural Perspectives of Multi-Ethnic Tongans

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Abstract

Tongans are a Polynesian people similar in identity to their close cousins in neighboring Samoa, Hawai’i, New Zealand, and Tahiti. Tonga is the last surviving Polynesian kingdom in the Pacific. It is a nation comprised of over 170 islands which are both coral and volcanic. The islands were also called “The Friendly Islands” by British Captain James Cook in the 1700s because of their warm and welcoming people. Tongans have intermarried for many centuries, more so than ever before in recent decades. They have intermarried amongst other Polynesians like Samoans. The first official mixing across racial lines occurred with Fijians who are Melanesians which began from 900 AD to the present. Tongan marriages with Fijians and Samoans were mainly chiefly. Now, Tonga has only been mixing with other cultures such as the Middle East, Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia fairly recently. Even though the number of mixed-race Tongans are growing, their Tongan identity is still very strong and intact. In the year 2000, the American Census Bureau declared that one in four Tongans in the country were more than one nationality. In this research paper, I interview Tongans of mixed heritage, and non-Tongans married to Tongans to explore their experiences, I found that the majority of these mixed Tongans identified with their Tongan side and non-Tongans married to Tongans also love the culture.

Keywords: Polynesian, Melanesian, hafekasi, Whiteness, Colorism
Introduction

It was the fall of 1990 and I had just started the first grade. I began to notice that I was different from everyone in my class. My class was mostly White; I was the only student of color. My teacher, Ms. Serena, was registering some of us students for the youngest class of Girl Scouts, a group called the Brownies. A kid who was chubby with straw-like blond hair and sea-blue eyes told me that I should try out because I had brown skin. For some reason, I was offended: a Caucasian kid telling me I had brown skin hurt my feelings. The only other time I experienced racism was a year earlier when I was in kindergarten and my granduncle, Fatani, came to stay with us. He did not speak any English. As I sat on his lap, he would rub my skin harshly with his ashy hands (which were darker than mine) and shout – “‘Uli’uli! ‘Uli’uli” which is the Tongan word for Black. I absolutely hated it!

At that time, I asked my mother what nationality I was, and she gave me a response that I considered very interesting and would affect how I viewed myself. She simply said – “You are German, British, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian, and Portuguese.” From then on, that is how I identified. I went on an ancestry website called RootsWeb when I was in high school and wrote on a message board that I was searching for the Lyden family genealogy – my European family surname. Three years later, I got a reply that the Lydens were actually from Ireland and settled on my mother’s island of Vava’u. The Europeans would change the cultural landscape of Tonga. Since then, Tongans often idolize and emulate White people. For a long time, I did the same. As numbers of Tongans of mixed heritage backgrounds grows, there is more acceptance for them and more representation.
The problem with not having enough representation is that mixed race Tongans do not have anyone to look up to. They have no one to draw encouragement, inspiration in and hope. Mixed-race Tongan role models not only make an example for other mixed Tongans, but for Tongans in general. *Hafekasi* had an impact on Tongan society for many years. They also show what Tongans are capable of in the motherland and overseas.

**Mixed-Race Tongan Representation**

**Famous Mixed Tongans In Music**

Since I was a child, I longed to see people who looked like me in magazines, movies and on the television. As I grew up in the 1990s, and became an adult in 2002, mixed-race Tongans in the media were next to none. A few years later, several talent shows in America, New Zealand, and Australia showcase gifted mixed-race Tongans. For example, Ben Lummis, who is Tongan-Scottish-Maori was the winner of New Zealand Idol 2006. Jordis Unga and Aaliyah Rose Mo’unga, who both have Tongan fathers and white mothers, were contestants on “The Voice” in America. Dinah Jane Hansen is of Danish-Tongan descent and premiered on “The X-factor” back in 2012 when she was just a teenager. She went on to become part of the successful girl group *Fifth Harmony* and then came out with her own music. Her views on social media, Spotify and YouTube number in the billions. She also has a strong following on FaceBook, Instagram and Tiktok. The recent winner of American Idol, Iam Tongi, is of Irish-Samoan-Tongan heritage. There are also famous mixed-race Tongan athletes. There are very talented people of mixed Tongan ancestry. Though numbers are still small, there has been a rise in well-known mixed Tongans in music and sports.

**Famous Mixed Tongans in Sports**
In the NFL, the San Francisco 49ers have a football player named Talanoa Hufanga who has a Tongan father and a white mother. In the NBA, there are two mixed Tongan basketball players – Jabari Parker who has a Black father and Tongan mother, in which he mentioned in a 2012 *Sports Illustrated* magazine article for which he is the first Tongan to grace the cover¹ and Steve Adams who has a British father and Tongan mother. His older sister, Valerie, is also a gold medal winner in shotput for the Olympics. Pita Taufatofua has a White-Australian mother and a Tongan father. His appearance in the 2016 Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil went viral when he held the Tongan flag shirtless, oiled up and wearing a Tongan ta’ovala (a Tongan garment that covers half the lower body). Amini Fonua, who has a Tongan father and a British mother, competed in swimming at the 2012 London Olympics. There are a lot of mixed Tongan role models in the diaspora to look up to. Hopefully, this trend of high-profile mixed-race Tongan role models will increase into the future. They display how mixed-race Tongans are moving up in the world, and show all of Tongans what success they are capable of.

**Importance Of This Research**

This topic is very near and dear to my heart because I am a product of generations of intermarriage. I am seeking to know how these multiracial Tongans and non-Tongans married to Tongans feel about Tongan identity. I ask the question: What does it mean to be a Tongan of mixed heritage, or be the parent of a mixed-race Tongan child? My research helps shed light on the history of this global community that is not well known, and connects mixed-raced Tongans in the larger diaspora. In this paper, I delve into the identity of being hafekasi (or half-caste). The word *hafekasi* in Tongan is derived from the English word “half-caste” which means mixed

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¹ Jeff Benedict, “The Best High School Basketball Player since Lebron James, but There’s Something more important to him than instant NBA fame: his faith”, *Sports Illustrated*, May 12, 2012, 88-96
race. I will focus on the different combinations between Tongans, Germans, Americans and more recently, Chinese. I feel that Tongans of mixed race are close to that part of their heritage as long as they have kept in touch with Tongan relatives, traditions and culture.

**Literature Review**

**The Germans And The Arrival Of Europeans**

Dutch explorers came to the Niuas, Niuatoputapu (translates as sacred Niua) and Niufo’ou (New Niua) in 1616. They were the first European explorers to ever come across the kingdom, over four centuries ago, their names were Wilhem Schouten and Jacob Le Maire. Since their arrival, they were followed by the Spanish, Portuguese, British, French and most recently, the Germans. They were thought of as gods, not only by Tongans but by Polynesians in general. The word for white man is *palangi*, and the literal translation means “to pierce or burst” which is *pa* and *langi* which means the sky or the heavens. This name was given to them because they had tall sails on their ships that went straight into the sky. Their arrival forever changed the way Tongans felt about themselves. Lighter skin, for example, became something to be praised and *palangi* ways were admired. This is when Tongans started intermingling with Europeans, namely the Germans in the 1800s.

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6 Lee, “Intermarriage”, 191
Germany has had a longstanding relationship with Tonga. Prussian Germans came via Samoa after they colonized it. Some settled on Ha’apai, but many settled on the islands of Vava’u and Tongatapu and created businesses like retail stores. They arrived in the mid- to late 1800s and had a treaty of friendship with Tonga by 1876. The first German immigrants from Pomerania began as a group of twenty-five people. The majority were men whereas a few, namely three, were women. Between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were over three hundred German men living in Tonga. One man named August Sanft, who was a baker born in Germany sent for his German wife, Sophie Dorner, to come to Tonga, but he is one of the few Germans in Tonga to have a German wife. Many Germans married Tongan women and today there are no more “pure”, unmixed white Germans in Tonga; they have come to look completely Tongan. None of them speak German as well. Nearly all of them only speak Tongan and English. There is very little research, let alone knowledge and information, on the children of these German settlers and their Tongan and part-Tongan wives. Nevertheless, many of them have German last names like Wolfgramm, Guttenbeil, Schaaf, Schaumkel, Sanft, and many others.

The German presence in Tonga is still deeply felt through familial ties. All the German male immigrants had children with Tongan women except for one. However, their German-Tongan children were discriminated against and mistreated. One woman who was the daughter of a German man and his Tongan wife was sent to school in Germany in the early 1900s. Her name was Frieda Wolfgramm. German law at that time prohibited non-Germans from marrying Germans. Children born to Tongan mothers and German fathers were considered “Native” or

7 Cook, “German-Tongan Identity In New Zealand”, 298.
8 Cook, “German-Tongan Identity in New Zealand”, 300.
Indigenous and “non-German.” Frieda soon fell in love with a German man but due to this law, she was not allowed to marry him. As a result of racism and this anti-miscegenation law, Frieda took her own life. However, this mistreatment was very limited; for the most part, German-Tongans were celebrated. They were praised for their beauty and intelligence.\footnote{Wendt, “The Vava’u Germans,” 292.}

Two elderly cousins named Makanesi Wolfgramm and Malina Wolfgramm Hendreson said they were honored to be part-German. Their German grandfather, Frederich Wolfgramm, had come to Vava’u from Pyritz, Germany in the 1880s. Their children and descendants are known as the Vava’u Germans. Makanesi explained when they did something like working diligently, full-blooded Tongans would say it was because of their European side. The German-Tongans are highly respected. They began as a relatively small group of German settlers in Tonga, and grew to thousands of their descendants being mixed German-Tongans around the world.\footnote{Wendt, “The Vava’u Germans,” 293.}

Their grandfather, Fredrich Wolfgramm, was one of the first Germans to come to Vava’u from Hamburg in 1881 at the age of 25. He was joined by his brother, Franz Otto Wolfgramm. Fredrich became wealthy through the copra trade he established in Vava’u. The copra trade is the harvesting of coconuts on plantations for use in products like coconut oil, coconut water and coconut milk.\footnote{Wendt, “The Vava’u Germans,” 294.} When World War I began, he and his fellow German countrymen who had settled in the islands were targeted by the British and seen as the enemy. From 1900-1970, Tonga was a British protectorate.\footnote{Wendt, “The Vava’u Germans”, 295}
Due to the fact that Frederich Wolfgramm was married to a Tongan and had children, he was allowed to carry on his business in Tonga. His wife, Kisaea, passed on and he remarried a German-Tongan woman named Martha Sanft. He had over a dozen children who all ended up emigrating to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. Therefore, they have multiplied throughout the world. Many reunions have hosted over five thousand of these German-Tongans. The study of these people is important, because they are the first original Europeans to intermarry with the Tongan people. Now, they are a huge part of the Tongan diaspora. Germans were the first to quantify blood quantum. They were divided into quarter-Germans and half-Germans.

**Toto – Blood**

Blood quantum is one way that race is estimated. It was brought about by White, racist males. During colonization and slavery, these racist, White people quantified race by blood. In the United States, for example, there were levels of mixed Black slaves such as *mulatto* (fifty percent Black) *quadroon* (twenty-five percent Black) and *octaroon* (one-eighth Black). The same goes for Native Americans who are denied benefits if their blood quantum falls below a certain amount. The United States had Jim Crow laws which meant that anyone with one drop of Black blood, also known as the “one-drop rule” or 1/64, were considered Black. This “one-drop rule” caused people to be thought of as “colored” even if they had less than two percent African heritage. It made them Black even though they were for all intents and purposes, looked and identified as Caucasian. Ironically, it is White Europeans who began this process, so in essence

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17 Elam, “Light, Bright and Damn near White”, 6
they were discriminating against their own people. When Hawai‘i became an American state, White legislators who took over created a measurement for blood.

Hawai’ians with less than fifty percent Hawai’ian blood quantum are denied land. For example, according to the Hawai’ian Homes Commission Act that began in 1921, a person had to be exactly one-half or fifty percent Hawai’ain or Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawai‘an) to be able to claim land.¹⁸ My computer teacher in high school had a Chinese mother born in Hawai‘i and a Kanaka Maoli father who was 1/32 Welsh. She signed up to get land in her native Maui and was rejected, because her 1/64 Welsh ancestry put her a percent below the recommended fifty percent requirement. Blood quantum is clearly a remnant of racism and colonization, brought about by white male colonizers. Tonga was never formally colonized, so blood quantum is seen differently by Tongans. Unlike the Hawai’ians, Native Americans and those with African ancestry, Tongans do not quantify blood.

Even with no Tongan ancestry, Tongans who regard themselves as a Tongan or a person with very little Tongan ancestry can be recognized as Tongan. In a dissertation by Tevita Molisi Manu’atu, called “A Tongan cultural model of identity,” he asked Tongans how they felt about blood quantum. One Tongan lamented that “Ko e toto ko e me’a ia ku tafe” or “Blood is something that flows.” He also said, “Tatau ai pe pe ko e hā e lōloa e nofo ha taha i muli, pe ko e hafekasi pe ko e hae kei vivili mai pe honau toto ki Tonga” which means “Regardless of how long one stays overseas, be they half-caste or whatever, their blood will still yearn for Tonga.”¹⁹

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https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv120qr70.5.

Toto or blood is tied to kainga or kinship. In a study of mixed Tongans or hafekasi, one anonymous interviewee reflected that even though hafekasi are treated fairly by members of the Tongan community, full-blooded Tongans sio lalo or look down upon them. That is because they tend to not speak the language fluently or observe the anga fakatonga or Tongan way. Full-blooded Tongans attribute this ignorance or lack of cultural knowledge to them because they do not have both parents who are Tongan. Another participant stated, “Ko e uhinga ku pehe ai he ko ene tamai ko e Tonga ka e fae palangi”, which translates as “The reason why he’s like that is because his father is Tongan and the mother is a foreigner.” This indicates that there is some racial discrimination against hafekasi; they are not seen as equals to full-blooded Tongans.

**Whiteness And White Privilege**

Being too White for the Tongans and too Tongan for the Whites is expressed by Joshua Uipi who wrote an article titled: Tongans and the Navigation of Authenticity in the United States. His father is from Ha’ateiho, Tonga and his mother is a White woman from Berkeley, California. He identifies as hafekasi because that is how he and others see him. Much like other Tongans, genealogy is important to him. He has lived most of his life in the United States and did not venture to Tonga until he reached adulthood. While there, he and his cousins were diving off cliffs into the ocean. A kid yelled out in Tongan, “Sio kie palangi!” which translates as: “Watch out for the White guy!” Joshua looked around for White people, and realized the boy was talking about him. This shocked him because he never thought of himself as White. Joshua also speaks

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of White privilege which is common in America, and that when he is in Tonga, he is considered
Caucasian and he is considered Tongan when he is in the United States.22

Many Tongans strive for Whiteness as it is desirable. This is evident in beauty pageants
like the Miss Heilala and Miss Tonga competitions that take place in Tongatapu every July. Quite
a handful of the winners had a white parent such as Tessi Tolutau and Nancy Maloni who both
have white mothers and Tongan fathers, and Anita Robert, Shirley Beaman, and Ma’ata
Mo’ungaloa who all had white fathers and Tongan mothers. Having a White phenotype is also
attributed to self-esteem.23 Darker skin is considered something negative while light skin allows
people to achieve a better lifestyle and “fit in” or not seem as threatening as those who look more
Tongan. Fine, straight hair is more desirable than course, curly hair. Flat and wide noses are not
wanted, but long, pointy ones are. Blue, hazel, gray, and green eyes are preferred over brown
eyes.24 Before Europeans, Tongans did not have this concept of race, and there was no hierarchy
of race and colorism

**Tongan-Americans Of Mixed Heritage: Past & Present**

The first large group of *hafekasi ‘Amelika*, or mixed-race Tongan-Americans, came about
during World War II from 1942-1945. There were between a million and two million American
servicemen in the South Pacific in those years.25 These soldiers, also called *sotia* in Tongan, left
behind a few hundred children with local Tongan women that they had romantic relationships

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24 Allen, “Racial Identity, Phenotype and Self Esteem”, 86.
The offspring of these unions searched for their American fathers, but very few were successful in reuniting with them.

Over five million people in the United States claimed to be more than one race in 2009. This went up a third since the year 2000, when the American Census Bureau allowed people to check more than one box. Out of the 875,000 people of Polynesian heritage in the United States, over 100,000 identified as multiracial with at least two or more cultural groups. That accounts for about almost fifteen percent of the Polynesian population. The largest Tongan populations are in California, Utah, Hawai’i and Texas. As of the mid-twentieth century to now, there are more and more mixed Tongans in America. Historically in the 1800s, Tongans intermarried with Germans, but as of the late 1900s, Tongans have begun to mix with Chinese who began coming in record numbers in the 1980s and 1990s. They are the latest group to intermarry with the Tongans. Now, there are part-Chinese Tongans or hafekasi Siaina and some Chinese who are married to Tongans. They are the latest group to intermarry with the Tongans.

Kau Siaina I Tonga – China’s Immigrants To Tonga

The most recent group from overseas that have become part of Tonga’s cultural landscape are the Chinese. There were hardly any Chinese people in Tonga until King Siaosi Taufa’ahau Tupou IV sold passports to expatriates from China during the 1980s and 1990s for $10,000 each. This practice stopped in the 1990s, because it was rendered unconstitutional. At the

27 Allen, “Racial Identity, Phenotype, and Self-Esteem, 64.
moment, immigrants from China are quickly growing in numbers and along with their descendants. In 2001, they totaled a little over four thousand. This may not seem like much, but Tonga’s current population is only 100,000. Presently, the Chinese control most of the shops. Some have married Tongan spouses. Non-Tongans are not allowed to own land, but are allowed to rent it. Many of the Chinese immigrants have rented land for ninety-nine years, the maximum time allowed on a land lease.30

It is unfortunate, because King Siaosi Taufa’ahau Tupou I stuck his hand into the earth and lifted a bit of soil into the air, proclaiming, “Ko Tonga mo ‘Otua ko Hoku Tofi’a” which means “God and Tonga are my inheritance.” He wanted to keep Tongan lands in Tongan hands when he united all of the islands under his power, and under one crown. China also has soft power in Tonga. The President of China, Xi Jinping and the current monarch of Tonga, King Siaosi Taufa’ahau Tupou VI are allies. The two governments are cordial with each other. China provides many scholarships to Tongans to travel to China and study. Therefore, China plays a role in Tonga’s education. Tonga has incurred a high amount of debt for the loans they have taken from China.31

In 2004 China and Taiwan offered Tonga money with no strings attached. The government quickly accepted the money they were given from China. Tonga rescinded its ties with Taiwan after twenty-six years of relations in 1997 during the Asian financial crisis and when Hong Kong went back to being under China. Tonga established relations with China in 1998. In the same year, Tonga built an embassy in Beijing. Tonga substituted their diplomatic relationship

30 Stanley, The South Pacific Handook, 204.
from Taiwan to China for these main reasons: they favored the Chinese policy makers, and lastly Tonga is heavily dependent on financial support from China. This means that as long as China gives money to Tonga, the two nations will continue to be intertwined economically, politically and socially.\textsuperscript{32}

In addition to King Tupou IV’s selling of Tongan passports to the Chinese, his only daughter and the only sister to today’s King Tupou VI is also involved in bringing the Chinese to Tonga. Princess Salote Pilolevu Tuita owns the only duty-free chain and satellite company, TongaSat. She is the main reason why Tonga dropped Taiwan for China. She and China linked up to do a satellite deal. Although the princess adamantly refuses to admit to doing this, her critics say otherwise. It is believed that she is the culprit. Instead, she claims a religious reason for being involved with China. She constantly says that she is doing it for church reasons, trying to convert the Chinese into Christians.\textsuperscript{33}

China gave Tonga soft loans to renovate the Dateline Hotel, advance Fua’amotu Airport, and enlarge Neiafu Airport in Vava’u. The Chinese Prime Minister gave Tonga a political payment of five million American dollars. In 2006, China gave them another six million American dollars. Nevertheless, the local Tongans have much resentment against the Chinese and their success. In November of 2006, hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators stormed the streets of Nuku’alofa. They looted and burnt down many businesses – over eighty percent of them were owned by the Chinese. It was thought that the Chinese were going to be intimidated and that relations between the two countries would worsen but they did not. A Chinese company


\textsuperscript{33} Lango’ia, , “China’s Diplomatic Relations with the Kingdom of Tonga.”, 166.
called Fu-Shing built a $1.47 million building in Nuku’alofa after the town was torched by the demonstrators.\textsuperscript{34} Tongans and Chinese have relatively good rapport in spite of the looting of the businesses. Now, there are part-Chinese Tongans or \textit{hafekasi Siaina} and some Chinese who are married to Tongans. They are the latest group to intermarry with the Tongans.

**Interviews and Insights**

As part of my research, I interviewed eight participants. I gathered and acquired information from them through Facebook. I interviewed them in the months of February and March of this year, 2024. I posted questions in their inboxes and they responded. To protect their identities, I used pseudonyms instead of their actual names. I interviewed three women who are Tongan/White named Sarah Evans, Mary Rogers and Talia Jorgensen, one man who is Tongan/Black named Gary Allan, one man named Miguel Perez who is Tongan/Native-American/Latino, one woman who is named Lisa Hartman who is Tongan-Chinese-German-Hawai’ian-Samoan, two men, a Samoan/Chinese man named Frank Sapolu, and a Chinese man named Eric Wong. Both of these men are married to Tongan women. I asked these questions: Where are you from in Tonga? What would you describe/identify yourself as? Could you tell me a bit about your family history? What parts of Tongan culture do you identify with? Are there any parts of Tongan culture that you particularly like/dislike? Why is that? How does Tongan culture play into your sense of community?

In the case of those with Chinese connections, I ask: Who is Chinese in your family? How do you identify culturally? What do you dislike or like about the Tongan culture and Chinese cultures? What would you change about both cultures? How long have you lived in

\textsuperscript{34} Lango’ia, “China’s Diplomatic Relations with the Kingdom of Tonga,” 168.
Tonga? What do you like/dislike about it? What racism have you encountered if any? How has China contributed to Tonga culturally, economically, politically, educationally? What would you change about Tonga?

**Chinese/Tongan Relations**

From my interviews I received a greater insight into how part-Chinese as well as Chinese married to Tongans felt about the culture. Among these three people of Chinese heritage, and the other five participants, there was a sense of pride, and strong identification as Pacific Islanders, even though they recognize their other heritage as well. This is evident in Frank Sapolu and Lisa Hartman’s interviews. Frank said:

“My father was the Chinese of my family, and my mother is also part Chinese, part Samoan.” We all identify ourselves i.e. our mother and brothers and sisters and all our kids as Samoan. We were born and raised in Samoa. I find it easy to associate with both Tongans and Chinese. The Tongan socio-cultural traits are similar to those of Samoa; this is particularly so due to the fact my wife is Tongan. The little Chinese culture that we know is quite fascinating particularly the habit of hard work and the concept of accumulation.

Frank draws some parallels between Tongan and Samoan culture as Tongan and Chinese cultures are totally different. When he speaks of the Chinese cultural values of hard work and accumulation, that is totally different from Tongan and Samoan cultures. Wealth is not how much a person acquires, it is how much they give away.

Lisa responded:

My Chinese ancestry originates from my mother’s side. My grandmother, my mothers’ mother carried the last name of Leong before she married, and spoke Cantonese at home. The Chinese and Tongan cultures are totally different. I cannot say that I dislike anything about the two cultures. However, I would say that what I do know from both cultures are limited from those who are raised in a fully Tongan or fully Chinese (Mandarin/Cantonese) speaking

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35 Frank Sapolu in discussion with the author, February 2024.
household. For example, I was not as fortunate to have the linguistic skills of speaking the language to my parents on a daily basis.

She went on to say:

My children and I identify as Pacific Islander. In some cultures, there is a certain protocol when speaking to elders, and that can be challenging. In Chinese culture, red is a significant color and jade and gold are important items that are given as gifts. Recently, at a funeral I learned the importance and significance of the Tongan hand-woven mats. There are so many more traditions and facets I wish I had paid attention to but I only realized when I became an adult.”

Lisa did not find appreciation for her culture until she became fully grown.

Despite the fact that Frank is primarily Chinese, seventy-five percent, he mainly identifies with his Polynesian side – his Samoan side. He feels that the Tongan, Chinese and Samoan cultures are very similar in the way they both preach the value of “keeping the family together.” Both participants say they would never want to change a thing about these cultures. Their words demonstrate how the Chinese have assimilated to these island cultures and how inclusive the Tongan culture is. Similar to Frank, Lisa’s Polynesian or Pacific Islander identity is very strong. She admits that the Tongan and Chinese cultures are very different, but do share a few commonalities such as honoring family and having respect for elders.

My last interviewee of this group was a man named Eric Wong from the Guangdong Province in China. He has been living in Tonga for well over thirty years. He has a Tongan wife and together they have three daughters. He also stated an appreciation for Tongan culture. “Some naughty boys call me names because I am Chinese, but I love Tonga so much foods, I enjoy their culture like tauolunga dancing at their wedding and they get together with families and much more. I do respect my wife’s culture by pushing our kids to it and I have no idea how to change this culture cause I’m happy with it. I have nothing to change both our culture, I’m happy to

36 Lisa Hartman in discussion with the author, March 2024.
share it with my family most important we happy nothing more than that malo (thank you) and ‘ofa lahi atu (I love you very much) from Tonga.”

Eric Wong has encountered some racial prejudice from young Tongans, but that is common all over the world; children can be cruel. Otherwise, he loves the Tongan culture, Tongan dance, Tongan food and the Tongan people. This is evident in the way that he chose a Tongan bride, began a family and runs a successful business in Tonga. Although there was a riot in the streets of Nuku’alofa, Tonga destroying more than three-quarters of Chinese businesses and having thousands of Chinese fleeing the country. Eric proves that not all Chinese despise Tongans for what they have done to them. Many Chinese, particularly those who have married Tongans, still love the country and its people as shown by Eric’s union with a Tongan wife and having part-Tongan children. Though this is not generally true for everyone, because I only interviewed one person.

Interviews With More Mixed Tongans

I conducted five more interviews with more multiracial Tongans. I interviewed three women who were Tongan and White, two were from America and one was from New Zealand. The first part-Tongan person I interviewed, a woman named Talia Jorgensen in her early fifties who also happens to be Mormon, reflected how she identified. She responded, “I identify myself as a child of God, not as White. White is a color, not a culture. When I have to check a race box, I check each and every box. I claim all my heritages. I am also too White for the Tongans and too Tongan for the Whites.” This goes back to how a person can be seen different from various perspectives. Like Joshua Uipi, it is similar to the “Goldy Locks Syndrome.” You are either too

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37 Eric Wong in discussion with the author, February 2024.
38 Talia Jorgensen in discussion with the author, March 2024.
much or not enough. Talia is very spiritual and does not let race define her. She considers herself all the nationalities that make up her cultural identity. Talia calls herself a person above anything else. This illustrates how race is arbitrary and is a social construction. Race is not based on or rooted in anything scientific. It was invented by racist Europeans. This came about to keep Europeans superior, making their “blood” ethnically pure, and alienated people who were predominantly White, viewed as “colored” and therefore inferior.

Another theme that the bulk of my interviews shared was the fact that they considered themselves mixed-race. When I asked Gary Allan how he sees himself, he acknowledges his Black father by saying, “I think of myself as Tongan and I come from Nuku’alofa, the capital of Tonga. My dad is African-American and was raised in Oklahoma on an Indian Reservation. My mother is from Tonga and was born and raised in Nuku Nuku. I wear my Tongan heritage in my heart, not on my sleeve.” This man was raised mainly by his Tongan relatives and loves being Tongan. This is evident when he says he wears his Tongan ancestry in his heart.

I interviewed another part-Tongan woman named Sarah Evans. This is what she had to say: “I am also hafekasi, meaning that I’m half Tongan and white. My mother is Irish and Russian, while my father is fully Tongan, having been born there. My grandpa is from Ha’afeva and my grandma is from Vava’u (my dad’s parents).” Unlike Talia, Sarah identifies as hafekasi. She is still young at the age of 21 years old, and comes from a different generation than Talia, but still thinks of herself as mixed race or hafekasi rather than merely a “child of God”. Miguel Perez also believes himself to be mixed race when he says, “My mom grew up in Ha’apai in the

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40 Elam, “Light, Bright and Damn near White”, 7
41 Sarah Evans in discussion with the author, March, 2024.
village of Lifuka. My first name being a Hispanic name, people often question my ethnicity. So, I always tell them that I am mixed: Tongan and Salvadoran.” Miguel acknowledges that he has a very Hispanic name which he feels throws people off and he recognizes both of his cultures – Polynesian and Hispanic. Like Sarah and Gary, Miguel sees himself as both races. Similar to Talia, he checks all racial boxes that apply to him.

Even though Talia thinks of herself as a “child of God” and despises being called hafekasi, she does feel that her parents are an interracial couple. She says: “I do not think of myself as hafekasi. I hate that term. I am not half of anything. I am a whole person. My dad is not White; he is an American. He is part Native-American. I don’t believe that there is anything such as a white culture.” She also discloses, “My mom is Tongan with some Maori and Fijian. She was born in Ha’apai and she is the youngest of seven children. My father is the eldest of five.” Another connection between Sarah, Miguel, and Talia is how they feel about Tongan culture and its core values. Talia explained:

This is where I really got an appreciation for my culture. My grandmother did not speak English, so I learned to speak Tongan. I enjoy learning different languages. We got a lot of knowledge from grandma. I love family. I was not raised in Tonga. I put God first always. God created us and therefore created the culture. We all come from God. If people believe that then the world would be a more peaceful place.42

Like Talia, Sarah also appreciates Tongan culture when she says: I grew up with relatives and other Tongan kids. In addition to my church friends, cousins, and large family, I met others through playing sports. I also grew closer to the culture by visiting Tonga late last year for a school field trip. I love the values that Tongan culture preaches such as giving, humility and deference for elders. I love how we give freely, but it has its ups and downs.43

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42 Talia Jorgensen in discussion with the author, March 2024
43 Sarah Evans in discussion with the author, March 2024.
Miguel, another interviewee feels the same way of the Tongan culture having disadvantages and advantages when he states, “I like family gatherings, faith, music, and cultural values. I like that we honor our elders and we show mutual respect with guests. I don’t necessarily like how forgiving and nice we can be with other people. We don’t expect things from others, which is fine because we do things out of love. But sometimes I see it in our community that we abuse that.”

What more than half of the interviewees have in common is that they are from the San Francisco Bay Area in California, and they all recognize themselves at part-Tongan. California has the largest number of Tongans in the United States followed by Utah, Hawai’i and Texas. This is the reason why most of the interviewees are from California, specifically coming from the San Francisco Bay Area. Another reoccurring theme is that most of these Tongans can trace their heritage to a village/island in Tonga. For example, Gary comes from Nukunuku, Talia and Miguel come from Ha’apai, Sarah comes from Vava’u and Ha’aféva, Lisa and Frank’s wife also comes from Ha’aféva. However, not all mixed-race Tongans are fortunate enough to know their Tongan heritage.

**Tongans Who Don’t Identify as Tongans**

Though most of the interviewees recognize their Tongan heritage, one woman does not. Her name is Mary Rogers who is in her late twenties, and she is a quarter Polynesian from Tonga and Samoa, and three-quarters New Zealander-European. She did not think of herself as a part-Tongan or Tongan at all. This is what she had to say in our conversation: “I do not know where I am from in Tonga. My father’s father was from Tonga, but my father was adopted and I never

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44 Miguel Perez in discussion with the author, March 2024.
got to know my Tongan side. Sadly, he passed away in the early 2000s from cancer.” Mary also went on to explain why she does not consider herself Tongan. She explained:

I know my father was born in Brisbane with a Tongan-Samoan Dad and Irish Aussie mum. I don’t identify with the Tongan culture. This would be because I was brought up in New Zealand by my mum who had New Zealand European parents. My dad didn’t engage me in anything Tongan either … Based on the little I know of the culture I like the music, dance, colorful clothes, art and the fresh island food. I like the art because it’s attractive with its muted tones and symmetry to the patterns. I never experienced Tongan culture except at school when our Pasifika students run an activity at school for Pasifika language week.”

Dissimilar to the other interviewees, Mary does not recognize her Tongan heritage since she did not grow up in the culture. Nevertheless, all the other part-Tongan interviewees do have a connection to their Tongan heritage. Mary’s case is different in that she never got to know her Tongan side while the others clearly have. Mary’s situation is the exception not the rule.

Conclusion

In closing, this capstone project has made me learn a lot not only about mixed-Tongan identities through interviews and research, but my own cultural identity and what it means to be Tongan. The Tongan identity is strong in these mixed individuals. They recognize themselves as mixed race, but are still close to their Tongan heritage. Some considered themselves as people first and do not stick to a set label, whereas others are comfortable with identifying themselves as hafekasi.

Being called or referring to one’s self as hafekasi is different among diverse people. The reason why some are offended by it and some are not could be because of their distinctive generations. For example, Talia Jorgensen is in her fifties and despises the name, whereas Sarah Evans who is only twenty-one is fine with it and has no issues or qualms as identifying as

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45 Mary Rogers in discussion with the author, March 2024.
46 Mary Rogers in discussion with the author, March 2024
hafekasi. She fully embraces it. For the most part, these participants identified as hafekasi. The term hafekasi was brought by the British over nearly two centuries ago. Some people find it offensive, others do not. Hafekasi is usually referred to Tongans who are mixed with another non-Polynesian culture, mostly White as the word comes from the English word “half-caste”. Some feel that the term is antiquated and derogatory. However, Tongans have been intermixing with Fijians for hundreds of years, so being hafekasi is nothing new to the Tongan people.

Unlike Mary Rogers, Sarah Evans, Gary Allan, Talia Jorgensen, Lisa Hartman and Miguel Perez, on the other hand, do identify as Tongan, but that is perhaps, because they grew up knowing their Tongan parents and relatives. What is mentioned in the portion on “blood quantum” earlier in the paper from Tevita Manu’atu’s dissertation states that no matter how much Tongan “blood quantum” a Tongan has does not matter – blood flows. Even though someone does not have much Tongan ancestry, they are still Tongan. Basically, Tongan identity changes with each individual and like spirituality and personality, it ranges from person to person.

If Tongans got to visit Tonga, they may have a stronger bond with the culture, people and land. For example, Sarah Evans had the lucky chance and blessing to spend a month in Tonga. She had the chance to meet many relatives, visit her grandparent’s home islands and participated in cultural practices. If Mary Rogers had the same opportunity, maybe her perspective on being Tongan would change. The fact that Mary does not see herself as Tongan despite having Tongan ancestry shows how different people feel. Identity varies among the different people and how they see themselves.

What I found out from my research and interviews is that the majority of my interviewees felt Tongan and the ones married to Tongans like Frank Sapolu and Eric Wong deeply love the
Tongan culture. There is very little material on Tongans in general and specifically mixed-race Tongans. As time goes by, there is more and more representation of Tongans on all platforms like education, politics and the media. Hopefully, there will be even more mixed-race Tongan role models.
Bibliography


Appendix

1. Where are you from in Tonga?
2. What would you describe/identify yourself as?
3. Could you tell me a bit about your family history?
4. What parts of Tongan culture do you identify with?
5. Are there any parts of Tongan culture that you particularly like/dislike?
6. Why is that?
7. How does Tongan culture play into your sense of community?

1. Who is Chinese in your family?
2. How do you identify culturally?
3. What do you dislike or like about the Tongan culture and Chinese cultures?
4. What would you change about both cultures?

1. How long have you lived in Tonga?
2. What do you like/dislike about it?
3. What racism have you encountered if any?
4. How has China contributed to Tonga culturally, economically, politically, educationally?
5. What would you change about Tonga?