‘Second generation’ Tongan transnationalism: Hope for the future?¹

Helen Lee

Abstract: Tonga’s economy is supported by remittances from Tongans overseas, but there are indications that the younger generations are unlikely to maintain this level of support. There appears to be a complacent attitude to remittances both within Tonga and in externally produced economic reports, yet if remittance levels drop significantly, the ramifications will be disastrous for Tonga. This paper looks at Tongan transnationalism in the context of the current situation in Tonga and the wider Pacific, arguing that it will be crucial, yet very difficult, to encourage the ‘second generation’ overseas to be involved in the process of nation building through transnational engagements. The major obstacles to young people’s establishment of transnational ties are examined, and the Tongan situation is compared to U.S. research on second generation transnationalism in other migrant groups. Finally, the ways in which transnational engagements could be encouraged are explored, particularly the importance of language learning and developing a sense of ‘belonging’ to the ‘homeland’.

Keywords: migration, remittances, second generation, Tonga, transnationalism

Many Tongans living overseas maintain a range of transnational ties through kinship networks, churches, ex-students’ groups, business relationships, and other links. The economic, social, political and emotional ties they have with their homeland of Tonga are activated in countless ways, including sending money or goods from overseas, travelling back and forth between Tonga and the diaspora,² circulating photographs and videotapes, making phone calls, sending faxes, and nowadays utilising emails and the internet (Lee, 2004). It is not even necessary to physically move between the two countries for Tongans to be ‘transnational’, and the extent of their transnational ties varies considerably in regularity, scope, and strength.

Author: Helen Lee, Sociology and Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Victoria 3086, Australia. Email: h.lee@latrobe.edu.au

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There are indications, however, that at a time when the maintenance of transnational ties has become easier, particularly due to developments in communications and transport, Tongan transnationalism is under serious threat of declining. My primary concern in this paper is with what I will call the younger generations of overseas Tongans, and the extent of *their* transnational ties. This includes the overseas born, and those who migrated as children and have been raised overseas. In particular, I want to raise some questions about them in relation to Tonga’s future; to look at the current situation in Tonga and the wider Pacific and why it is going to be crucial – yet very difficult – to encourage the involvement of these younger generations in the process of nation building through transnational engagements.

**Tongan Transnationalism**

The term ‘transnationalism’ is employed here as it is used within the literature on transnational migration, to refer to the multiple connections maintained with the country of origin after migration (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, 1994; Levitt and Waters, 2002a; Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc, 1992; Mahler, 1998). As Georges Fouron and Nina Glick-Schiller (2002) have argued, this goes beyond simply keeping in touch with kin in the homeland, since it involves practices that shape the everyday lives of those involved. Those who maintain transnational ties ‘organize their daily economic, familial, religious, and social relations within networks that extend across the borders of two nation-states’ (Fouron and Glick-Schiller, 2002: 171). The impact of transnational ties, such as those between Tonga and the diaspora, is that they maintain a sense of the place of origin as ‘home’ even while those involved – the migrants and their children – may also feel ‘at home’ in the country in which they live.

Not all overseas Tongans can be called transnational, as some do not actively maintain any direct ties to Tonga. However, in most cases they at least have some indirect involvement in the multiple forms of links that exist. For example, a Tongan who chooses not to remit money or goods to kin in Tonga, or to have any other forms of contact on an individual basis, may nevertheless engage in some level of transnational connection through participation in a Tongan church congregation or ex-student association, which would funnel his donations of money back to the associated institution in Tonga. In such cases it is useful to expand the concept of transnationalism to include the institutions that enable individuals to participate in a form of indirect transnationalism.

Transnationalism challenges the idea of the nation-state (Basch *et al.*, 1994). Given the extensive network of ties between Tongans at home and abroad, the ‘state’ may remain the geographically bounded territory of Tonga, but the ‘nation’ can be seen as *all* Tongan people, including those living overseas. This expansion of the ‘nation’ to include the diaspora is particularly significant for countries like Tonga, where the overseas population is as large, or even larger, than the population in the islands. There are no accurate figures...
for the number of Tongans (including ‘part-Tongans’) living overseas, but if we include the overseas born it does seem likely that the diaspora is now at least as big as the home population. Some recent figures are available from the main receiving nations: New Zealand’s 2001 Census recorded 40,700 Tongans (Statistics New Zealand, 2003: 1); the U.S. Census 2000 recorded 36,800 (US Census Bureau, 2001: 9); and Australia’s 2001 Census recorded 14,889 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). These figures are likely to be underestimates due to the many problems with the collection of statistics, the number of overstayers (illegal immigrants), how ‘Tongan’ is classified, and so on (Lee, 2003b: 18–19).

The overseas-born Tongans now outnumber the Tongan-born in most receiving nations; for example, they made up 56.8 per cent of the Tongan population in New Zealand in 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003: 2). In my study in Melbourne, Australia, of 430 people of Tongan descent, 52.3 per cent were born outside Tonga. Since the biggest wave of Tongan migration was in the late 1960s and 1970s, the majority of the ‘first generation’ who migrated as adults now have adult children, and those who migrated as children in that period now have families of their own. In the Melbourne sample there were only 15 third generation children and one fourth generation, but these higher order generations are poised to grow very quickly and will further increase the proportion of overseas born Tongans.

In an early study of Tongan migration, George Marcus (1974) identified a pattern of ‘dispersed family estates’. These were groups of adult siblings who had moved apart through internal and overseas migration but retained complex
networks of ties, and he described this as ‘a major feature of modern Tongan social structure’ (1974: 92). Although Marcus did not use the term transnational, the continuing economic links between the dispersed sibling sets were an important element in the creation of the extensive transnational networks that now exist between members of kāinga (extended families) in Tonga and overseas.

Marcus’ initial concern was with the ways families were successful in using their overseas links to maintain and enhance their economic position and social status in Tonga. Later, he argued that these ties between kin in Tonga and the diaspora also were significant for ‘local nation-state development’ (1993: 27) and that the King’s attempts over the years to find ways to boost Tonga’s economic development could be seen as his way of ensuring that Tonga remained ‘both the economic and symbolic centre of an internationalizing culture’ (1981: 61, original emphasis). Thus, the King’s efforts could be seen as attempts to encourage migrants to retain their allegiance to Tonga as ‘home’. Attempts by the King, and other members of the Royal Family, to find the key to Tonga’s prosperity have continued, with ventures as varied as the production of squash for export (van der Grijp, 1997) and the establishment of the satellite venture Tongasat (Morton, 1999), but none have met the underlying aim of achieving prosperity. One of the latest examples is the Crown Prince’s embracing of information and communications technology, to which I will return later.

In an attempt to foresee the impact of Tongans’ migration, Marcus suggested that over time, Tongans overseas might retain an emotional attachment to home, but it could lose its political and economic importance to them. He proposed that:

Tonga might remain merely a struggling nation-state in the face of flourishing overseas concentrations in places such as Hawaii and California, residents of which would continue to affect the overall conditions of Tongans at home by their selective participation and contributions in persisting family networks (1981: 60).

The scenario Marcus predicted more than 20 years ago describes quite well the current situation, but what we need to consider now is what will happen if the younger generations of Tongans overseas cease to contribute to those family networks and withdraw from other forms of transnational ties.

First, we need to briefly consider the current involvement of diasporic Tongans in the home nation. What Marcus was describing for Tonga is part of what is referred to in the literature on transnationalism as ‘deterritorialized nation-state building’, in which migrants, and political leaders from their country of origin, construct a view of migrants as ‘loyal citizens of their ancestral nation-state’ (Basch et al., 1994: 3). That is, migrants continue to contribute, particularly economically, to their home country, usually through a sense of obligation and belonging. The significance of migrants to their home society also lies in their incorporation into their host society (America,
Australia, and elsewhere), since through this they have access to income and other resources, including the right to sponsor further migrants, and this can help those at home.

Sending remittances is one of the most important ways transmigrants continue to play a role in the nation building process of their homelands. Tongan migrants’ remittances are supporting the nation’s economy, which is otherwise stagnant, if not declining. In 1989 and 1990, the officially recorded remittances to Tonga totalled 59.6 per cent of Tonga’s GDP, or AUS$43.9 million (Appleyard and Stahl, 1995: 33). Since then the proportion of GDP supplied by remittances has fluctuated; for example, in its report on the financial year 2002, the Asian Development Bank states that remittances comprised around 50 per cent of GDP, up from 40 per cent in 2001 (2003: 2). The proportion of GDP they represent may have declined overall in the past decade, but remittances clearly remain an essential component of Tonga’s income. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade reported that in 2002–3 remittances were ‘the single major economic activity for Tonga’, totalling around T$150 million (2003: 2). It also needs to be borne in mind that any official figures on remittances omit income from the many forms of ‘unofficial’ remittances that are received, which can constitute more than half of total remittances (Appleyard and Stahl, 1995; Brown and Foster, 1995).

Research on Tongan remittances has shown a shift towards in-kind remittances, such as goods for use by the family in Tonga or for resale at markets, direct payments of airline tickets, and other forms of assistance, although transfers of money continue to be an important source of income for many families (Brown and Connell, 1993). Research on remittance practices of the first generation has produced inconsistent results. Some studies have shown that even after many years overseas, migrants continue a high level of remittances (Brown, 1998; Brown and Foster, 1995; Brown and Walker, 1995), whereas others have demonstrated that remittance levels tend to decline over time (Connell and Brown, 1995). My own findings tend to support the latter, known as the ‘remittance decay hypothesis’ (Brown and Foster, 1995: 38), as first generation migrants in my study said they sent money and goods only infrequently and irregularly, most preferring to wait until they receive kole: requests for money or goods for particular purposes (see also Lafitani, 1992). Of more interest is the fact that very few of the Tongans in my study who were under the age of thirty sent any money or goods directly to Tonga; the others indicated that they had no intention of remitting in the future. In many cases interviewees, both older migrants and members of the younger generations, stated that they had no family left in Tonga to whom they felt obliged to send remittances, and for these people other forms of transnational ties had also declined or had been redirected to kin in other locations outside Tonga.

Another important shift in the practice of remitting has been its increasingly individualistic nature. In his early discussion of ‘dispersed family estates’ Marcus argued that relationships among the sets of kin had ‘a readily observable corporate quality’ (1974: 94). This corporate analogy was echoed later in the work of Geoffrey Bertram and Ray Watters who wrote about Polynesians’
‘transnational corporations of kin’ (1985; see also Bertram, 1986; Bertram, 1999; Connell and McCall, 1989; Poirine, 1998). Much of this work focused on remittances, and how overseas members of extended families remitted to those in the islands. However, I have found, as has Kerry James (1993: 360), that rather than acting within ‘corporations of kin’ many Tongans now remit on a more individual basis, or as nuclear family units.

A number of factors appear to be contributing to the continued flow of remittances, particularly the rapid rise in the basic cost of living in Tonga, which has increased the need for people to kole for assistance. For example, costs of services such as electricity have risen sharply. In addition, Tongans have enthusiastically embraced materialism, as evidenced by the rapidly growing number of large houses, four wheel drive vehicles, and consumption of expensive consumer goods, all of which maintains an ongoing demand for remittances. The continuing practice of migrants’ children being sent to Tonga to live with kin for varying periods of time tends to create an ongoing flow of remittances from the children’s parents as contributions to their upkeep.

Looking at the issue from the perspective of the remitters, it appears that when Tongans overseas increase their earning capacity this is not necessarily channelled back into their immediate family; rather, it enables them to contribute a higher level of remittances. A further factor is that many in the younger generations still live with their parents, who commonly expect them to hand over a substantial portion of their wages if they are employed. This money can then be redirected to kin in Tonga, or the church, or other channels of remittances.

Fundraising within overseas populations creates a significant flow of money from the diaspora to Tonga that is often overlooked in discussions of remittances. The collection of money, often at social functions or concerts, facilitates contributions even from individuals and families overseas not involved in direct remittances. The money collected through fundraising is usually directed to institutions such as churches and schools, or to aid causes such as hurricane relief, rather than to families. As such it is not directly part of the kinship-based model of remitting, although of course it is impossible to completely separate such institutions from kin networks in Tonga. For now, the rate of fundraising appears to be growing along with the migrant populations, as an increasing number of churches and formal associations are established, most of which inevitably become involved in the fundraising process.

Whether the younger generations will continue to support fundraising efforts is unclear, but as we will see, they are increasingly critical of both fundraising and more direct remittances. If we look ten or twenty years ahead, to when the youth of today have established independent households, and have control of their own incomes, the inevitable question is whether they will choose to remit, either directly or indirectly. Studies of the ‘second generation’ in other migrant groups (discussed below) have shown that very few maintain significant transnational ties, and a similar pattern is emerging for Tongans overseas. Unless there are profound changes in the relationship of the younger generations with the Tongan ‘homeland’ and in their sense of
‘belonging’, the prospect of maintaining current levels of remittances is remote, which gives serious cause for concern for Tonga’s economic situation. Although warnings of this impending crisis have appeared in a number of analyses of remittances (for example, Brown and Walker, 1995; Campbell, 1992; James, 1991, 1997), it is surprising how complacent many in Tonga are about remittances, as are the various reports on Tonga’s economic situation, such as those from the Asian Development Bank (2003), the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2003), and the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2003).

Studies of overseas Tongans’ ties with their homeland have focused primarily on kinship networks and on economic ties such as remittances, but transnational ties are multidimensional and it is important to look at other ways Tongans in the diaspora are able to remain involved in their ‘homeland’. What becomes clear is that while the remittances and other economic support they provide are welcomed, there are often obstacles to them having a broader input into nation-building. For example, the new ideas and attitudes they may adopt – about issues such as class, gender and power – are not so welcome (as has been found for migrants from the Caribbean – see Basch et al., 1994).

In their discussion of transnationalism, Fouron and Glick-Schiller describe ‘long distance nationalism’ as the active involvement of people in the process of nation building in their ‘homeland’ despite their usual residence elsewhere:

Long distance nationalists may vote, demonstrate, contribute money, create works of art, give birth, fight, kill, and die for a ‘homeland’ in which they may never have lived. Meanwhile, those who live in this homeland will recognize these actions as patriotic contributions to the well-being of their common homeland (2002: 173).

For Tonga this description needs to be modified to acknowledge that only some of those in the homeland recognise their actions as patriotic, but certainly it can be argued that there are many long distance nationalists amongst the Tongans living overseas. They have never been called on to ‘fight, kill, and die’ for their homeland, and have not formed political groups for the purpose of lobbying foreign governments to intervene in Tongan affairs, as has happened in some other migrant populations. Yet many Tongans in the diaspora have continued to play an ongoing and significant role in nation building, most notably through their involvement in the churches and participation in annual church conferences held in Tonga. Overseas Tongans’ influence ‘behind the scenes’ also has been significant, such as can be seen in the support given to the pro-democracy movement. Many different organisations and associations have been established in the diaspora, and while these have had links with Tonga mainly on the basis of fundraising and other support, and have not attempted to be directly involved in Tongan politics or other areas of public life, there are some exceptions. For example, the first president of the Tonga-USA Business Council, formed in 2000, explicitly described the Council and its members as ‘nation builders’ (Matangi Tonga, 2000).
In recent years the actions of the King and the Tongan government have created increasing disquiet amongst Tongans, including the overseas population, such as the illegal selling of passports, the missing millions of the Tonga Trust Fund, and the ‘flag of convenience’ international ship registration scheme. Concerns about these issues, and many other allegations of corruption, lack of accountability, and government misspending have been publicly aired by the members of the pro-democracy movement, now known as Tongan Human Rights and Democracy Movement, and in the New Zealand based newspaper, Taimi ‘o Tonga. The government’s response has been frequent court battles with the pro-democracy activists, particularly ‘Akilisi Pohiva (Fonua, 2003c), and a series of attempts to ban the Taimi (Fonua, 2003b; Moala, 2002). Recently there have also been proposals to change the Constitution, including changes that would add new restrictions to the freedom of speech and of the press, and a further change which would make laws passed by the Legislative Assembly and Ordinances passed by the King not subject to judicial review (Fonua, 2003a, Matangi Tonga, 2003). These latest proposals have deeply alarmed many Tongans both at home and abroad, as well as many non-Tongans, including New Zealand’s Foreign Affairs Minister (Boland, 2003). The greatest fear expressed was that the changes would ‘render meaningless the notion of a Constitution which guarantees rights and freedoms’ (Powles, cited in Senituli, 2003: 2). In Tonga, these concerns led to a demonstration in Nuku’alofa on October 6th, 2003, with Tonga’s Catholic Bishop, Soane Foliaki, leading the protest march (Pacific Beat, 2003). Estimates of the number of protesters vary from 2,000 to 8,000 but in either case it was the biggest demonstration in Tonga’s history. Representatives from the New Zealand Tongan community presented a petition opposing the proposed amendment.

The ‘long distance’ Tongan nationalists are becoming increasingly vocal, as they become more concerned for the future of their homeland, and they are likely to seek ways to be more directly involved. In the not too distant future it would not be surprising if at least some of the overseas population unites to demand more of a say in the nation building process. How many of the first generation migrants will be prepared to be so directly involved cannot be predicted, given the deep seated faith of many Tongans in their King and social system. It is possible that the majority will simply withdraw their ties altogether or narrow them to direct assistance to kin, reducing the likelihood of their children and grandchildren maintaining their ties to Tonga. Even in the case of those who are prepared to be activists for change, whether their children, and children’s children, will want to sustain that kind of involvement is a critical issue.

One obvious barrier to overseas Tongans’ involvement in their nation’s affairs is their inability to vote in Tongan elections. The issue was raised with the Prime Minister’s Office in 1999 and there was even some talk of change for the 2002 elections (Fonua, 1999). If the overseas Tongans who have retained Tongan citizenship were allowed to vote it could make a significant difference to the outcome of elections. In the 2002 elections a total of 28,953 votes were cast in Tonga (James, 2002: 314), and the number of potential overseas voters has been very cautiously estimated as 25,000 (Fonua, 1999).
This issue of voting rights raises wider concerns about the rights of overseas Tongans. Land, in particular, is already a contentious issue and the question of whether long-term migrants should retain rights to land has been raised for some time without resolution. Gerard Ward has said of the Pacific more generally, ‘(t)hose who live overseas and seek to hold to their emotional, social and potential economic links with the homeland, are likely to argue for continued recognition of rights. The whole question has the potential to create
great rifts between the homeland and expatriate communities’ (1997: 192). What tends to be ignored in debates about voting, or land rights, are the younger generations overseas: if Tonga is going to be increasingly dependent on their economic support, which in turn seems to be dependent on the maintenance of other ties, what rights will they have?

LOOKING AHEAD: TONGA UNDER PRESSURE

There is plenty of cause for concern about Tonga’s economic future, given its heavy reliance at present on remittances. As mentioned previously, the biggest wave of migration was several decades ago, so many of the original migrants are aging. The tightening of immigration policies in the host nations in recent years has reduced the flow of new migrants to a trickle. If this continues it is inevitable that the aging first generation will have a decreasing capacity to contribute remittances and that the small number of new migrants will not be enough to sustain the current remittance level. A report recently tabled in the Australian Senate by the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, A Pacific Engaged, discusses the possibility of ‘special migration access to Australia’ for Pacific Islanders, along the lines of a guest worker scheme (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 70–76). It recommends the development of a pilot programme, to be developed by ‘Australian industry groups, State governments, unions, Non-Government Organisations and regional governments’ (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 76). If such a programme was introduced it would certainly contribute to the flow of remittances, although the volume of this flow would depend on the number of temporary migrants involved.  

The only alternatives to increased migration are to find a way to maintain the flow of remittances from the younger generations, or find a way to manage without them. The latter seems unlikely, particularly without any social security system in Tonga and with continuing problems of low wages, limited employment opportunities and difficulties accessing land. In addition, attempts to achieve Tonga’s economic self-reliance have been unsuccessful thus far.

Tonga also has to prepare for possible changes to the provision of foreign aid, as concern grows in donor countries about the ongoing economic problems in Pacific nations. Australian academic Helen Hughes recently published a controversial paper, ‘Aid has failed the Pacific’, which states that given these problems, ‘The Australian stance most likely to be effective would be to suspend all aid and thus to provide the catalyst for change’ (2003: 2). She also suggests a ‘softer option’ that would be to ‘insist on the principle of mutual obligation’ – that is, attach a lot more strings to aid and more checks and balances. However she later qualifies that by saying it would be pointless unless Pacific nations change their policies (Hughes, 2003: 22). Her report is extremely damning of the Tongan government and monarchy, alleging ‘the King and his barons [sic] have appropriated, and lost, millions of public money which they find indistinguishable from their personal finances’ (Hughes, 2003: 9). Such perceptions make Tonga a vulnerable target for any
changes to Australia’s aid programme. The report *A Pacific Engaged* addresses similar arguments made by Hughes in her submission to the committee, regarding the ‘failure’ of aid to the Pacific, and reports the strenuous objections to her claims put forward by AusAID (2003: 94–96). The report ‘does not support any suspension or reduction in development assistance’ nor does it support imposing more stringent conditions on aid, favouring instead ‘incentive programs’; on the other hand, it does not make any formal recommendations on these issues.

Apart from her claims about misuse of aid and, more broadly, poor economic performance, Hughes also argues that ‘disintegration in the Pacific is becoming a threat to Australia’s security’ (2003: 22). The Australian Strategic Policy Institute has described some Pacific states (PNG, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) as ‘potential havens for terrorist groups’ (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 174). These claims clearly place the Pacific within the expanding discourse on terrorism, and again Tonga is vulnerable, since some actions of the Tongan state leave it open to being perceived in this way, such as the debacle of the shipping registration scheme, which led to a ship sailing under the Tongan flag allegedly carrying arms to the Middle East. In its discussion of security issues, the report *A Pacific Engaged* makes a clear reference to Tonga in its claim: “There has also been a trend for some Pacific governments to seek alternative sources of revenue through questionable activities such as the sale of passports, flags of convenience and money laundering, all of which are potentially quite destabilising” (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 177).

Closely tied to these concerns about economic performance and potential security threats is the likelihood of increased intervention by powerful nations into Pacific nations’ affairs. The Australian-led intervention in the Solomon Islands that began in July 2003 was a clear sign of a shift in Australian’s relationship with the Pacific. Then, in August, Australia’s Prime Minister, John Howard, revealed at the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Auckland his government’s proposal for what some in the media have dubbed a ‘Pacific Union’ (e.g. Forbes, 2003). The report *A Pacific Engaged* recommends the establishment of a ‘Pacific Economic and Political Community’, based primarily on concerns about ‘the economic and social problems of the region’ and acknowledging concerns about ‘regional security’ (2003: 7). The report makes 33 formal recommendations in all, primarily about economic, political and strategic issues in Australia’s relationship with the region. The appointment of an Australian, former diplomat Greg Urwin, as secretary-general of the Pacific Islands Forum, despite initial strong resistance from the representatives of Pacific nations at the Auckland meeting, suggests the increased likelihood of at least some of Australia’s plans being carried out.

The changes that are being proposed in Australia’s relationship with the Pacific are causing a flurry of concern in Pacific circles. Papua New Guinea’s Prime Minister, Michael Somare, responded to the Australian push to tighten its controls over the spending of aid money by claiming this would be ‘contravening a sovereign state’ (Forbes, 2003). It seems that at the heart of the concerns
is a fear of loss of sovereignty, although the Senate report recommending the changes is careful to emphasise that Pacific nations’ ‘independence is respected’ by Australia (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 8). Nevertheless, Alexander Downer, Australia’s Foreign Affairs Minister, stated in June 2003 that ‘sovereignty in our view is not absolute’ (ABC Online, 2003), causing ripples of consternation. Australia’s official position at present is that it is ‘not a neo-colonial power’ but that it has a policy, in events such as those unfolding in the Solomon Islands, of ‘cooperative intervention’ (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee, 2003: 157).

For Pacific nations to avoid, or at least minimise, increased intervention in their affairs from Australia and other world powers, they will need to demonstrate to the rest of the world that such intervention is unnecessary. For Tonga, it will be essential to maintain the integrity of its constitution and legal system to hold onto the independence of which Tongans are so proud (Morton, 2001). However, this will not be enough: it also will be crucial to build on the existing transnational ties, in order to strengthen Tonga as a nation and safeguard its economy. Therefore, if we are looking at Tonga’s future it is clear that it is not sufficient to generate emotional and symbolic ties to Tonga in the younger generations of Tongans overseas; they need to have active ties to Tonga that in some way contribute to nation-building.

THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS: LOOSENING THE TIES?

Needless to say, there are significant obstacles to the formation and maintenance of ties between the younger generations and a ‘homeland’ many of them have never visited. One of the most difficult hurdles to overcome is the fact many young Tongans overseas do not have a secure identity as ‘Tongan’, often because they lack language and cultural skills. Without such skills the authenticity of their identification as Tongan is often challenged (Morton, 1998), and many feel excluded and alienated from their communities. In addition, they often have little sense of connection to Tonga itself, and as I have discussed elsewhere, even those who have the opportunity to visit Tonga often do not feel ‘at home’ for various reasons, particularly the rather ambivalent attitude of many Tongans toward visitors from the diaspora (Lee, 2003b). Why, then, would they be inclined to be involved in nation-building processes?

Even if members of the younger generations did want to be able to maintain the level of support that their parents have managed, a whole range of issues need to be addressed within diasporic populations to make this possible. Although some Tongans overseas have found success, many others are caught in a cycle of poverty and associated social problems that will make it difficult for their children to contribute economically to Tonga. Connected both to the struggles of the overseas population and to the diminishing sense of identity for younger Tongans in the diaspora is their increasingly disapproving attitude towards remitting and, more generally, kavenga (obligations, particularly to kin). A common complaint is that by draining families’ incomes this prevents them from getting ahead in the host nation. Many members of the younger
generation have grown up watching their parents struggle to earn enough income to cover their obligations to kin, church, nobility, and so on, often leaving their immediate family wanting. These increasingly negative attitudes extend to the fundraising efforts of churches, ex-students’ associations and other Tongan organisations overseas, and to the ‘donations’ of money and goods that are funnelled to Tonga’s nobility and royal family. This seriously threatens even the ‘indirect transnationalism’ that currently serves as a crucial source of economic support for Tonga. These fundamental changes in attitude in relation to finances and kinship obligations amongst many members of the younger generations could have far-reaching implications for Tonga.

The high rate of intermarriage creates further obstacles to ongoing connections to Tonga. One third to a half of Tongans overseas marry non-Tongans, and although the extent to which ‘mixed’ couples follow the Tongan way varies enormously, overall they are less likely to send remittances to Tonga or to maintain other forms of transnational ties (Lee, 2003b). Their children are even less likely to maintain these ties, particularly as often they are not accepted as ‘real’ Tongans and may have difficulty identifying as Tongan. Given the high rate of intermarriage these children represent a significant proportion of the younger generations; in my study 39.4 per cent of the Australian born cohort was part-Tongan. Many are unlikely to feel any sense of ongoing connection or obligation to the Tongan nation-state. This is also the case for those in the younger generations, including many part-Tongans, who have adopted pan-ethnic identities, that is, as ‘Polynesian’ or ‘Pacific Islander’ (Lee, 2003b: 245–251). While some symbolic, emotional attachment may remain, ongoing economic support is less likely.

Some of the factors that have the potential to facilitate and enhance overseas Tongans’ sense of connection to Tonga can also serve to limit their actual involvement, further diminishing the likelihood of active transnational ties. In the diaspora, Tongan newspapers, the Tongan magazine Matangi Tonga, community radio programmes, and internet sites can be readily accessed, enabling people to keep up with news and gossip, and to retain their emotional links to ‘home’. Internet sites have emerged as an important new means of communication amongst the diasporic Tongan population, particularly the younger generations (Lee, 2003b; Morton, 1999). Tongan sites, such as Planet Tonga (www.planet-tonga.com) and the now defunct Kava Bowl, have Tongan participants from all over the world who are eager to communicate with one another, share their experiences and opinions, and access news and information about Tonga itself, often sparking an interest in Tonga that was either absent or minimal before. They are helping build a greater sense of a ‘global’ Tongan community, particularly amongst young people, yet this does not necessarily translate into an increase in actual transnational ties. Rather, it seems to foster what has been called ‘emotional transnationalism’ (Wolf, 2002); an emotional attachment to the idea of a homeland. ‘Anapesi Ka’ili, who is involved with the Planet Tonga site, recently reported that the site receives one million ‘hits’ per month, and described the site as enabling an emotional and symbolic ‘re-turn’ home, functioning as a ‘cyber homeland’ (Ka’ili, 2003).
SECOND GENERATION TRANSNATIONALISM

Systematic studies of ‘second generation’ transnationalism in migrant populations are just beginning to be published (Levitt and Waters, 2002a), and it is clear that the issues I have described for Tongans are very common across most groups. Unfortunately, the usual pattern is that only a small minority of the second generation retains strong ties to the ‘homeland’, particularly in the sense of being involved in nation-building. That minority can, when necessary, help to revitalise the ties of others who are less involved (Kasinitz, Waters, Mollenkopf and Anil, 2002); for example, after a natural disaster those most involved can call on others to contribute financially. Yet this temporary surge of support does not contribute to the ongoing, daily work of nation building.

Rubén Rumbaut (2002) studied nearly 2,500 members of the second generation in migrant populations in the U.S. from Southeast Asia, Latin America, Mexico and China, and found that only 2.4 per cent of them had a ‘high level’ of transnational attachment. By ‘high level’ he meant simply that they had visited the ‘home’ country at least once, and they remitted at least once a year. In none of the groups was there more than 10 per cent who had such a level of transnational attachment, and the foreign-born within the sample were least likely to send remittances (2002: 84). Rumbaut concluded: ‘there is very little evidence that the kinds of attachments that are fundamental to pursuing a meaningful transnational project of “dual lives” are effectively sustained in the post-immigrant new second generation’ (2002: 91).

The papers in the volume edited by Peggy Levitt and Mary Waters (2002a) present research on a wide range of migrant populations, utilising a number of divergent theoretical and methodological approaches. Many of the authors reach the conclusion that the factor that most encourages attachment to the home country is knowledge of the ‘home’ language. ‘It is language, more than land and history, that provides the essential form of belonging’ (Ignatieff, 1993 cited in Rumbaut, 2002: 43). Also important are knowledge about the home country; religious participation, which can assist with ‘ethnic socialization’; having citizenship in the host country, making travel to and fro simpler; individuals and families having secure financial status; and close family cohesion. Rumbaut found that the frequency of remitting was closely tied to ‘subjective attachment, and commitment, to the country of origin’ (2002: 89). Not surprisingly, the young people most likely to become ‘long distance nationalists’ are those who grow up within transnational networks (Fouron and Glick-Schiller, 2002: 195).

If we look at the factors contributing to the maintenance of transnational ties, it becomes clear that unless the Tongan language is maintained in overseas populations, unless second and subsequent generations remain involved in churches and other transnational institutions, and unless the younger generations have the ability and desire to contribute financially, transnational ties will significantly decline. Without a sense of belonging, there is little to motivate overseas Tongans to maintain ties to home, and since one aspect of
those ties, remittances, are so crucial to Tonga’s economy, what is at stake could be the very future of Tonga.

So what could be done to encourage the younger generations in the diaspora to maintain transnational ties to Tonga? Clearly, it is crucial to help them to build a secure sense of identity and belonging, which necessitates the acquisition of at least some level of competence in language and cultural skills. I found that the most ‘successful’ of the younger generations, using both Tongan and non-Tongan definitions of ‘success’, are those who manage to do well in the formal education system and in their occupations overseas, yet are fluent in Tongan and at ease with the Tongan way; in other words, those who are comfortable in both worlds. However, both ‘worlds’ can be found outside Tonga, in the overseas populations and in the wider society, so ‘success’ in these terms does not necessarily equate with transnational ties.

What is also needed is a sense of Tonga as another ‘home’; a home to which the individual feels loyalty and a desire to contribute to the process of nation building. This ideal is difficult to achieve, particularly given the ambivalence many in Tonga feel towards those overseas – reflected in the often unwelcoming reception visiting youth receive. Tongans who experience racism and discrimination in their host country (whether or not they have achieved ‘success’) may be more likely to maintain their loyalty to Tonga. Research on other migrant groups in the U.S. suggests that ‘the negative reception of people of colour gives them more motivation to stay involved in a sending society in which they are members of the majority’ (Levitt and Waters, 2002b). The other side of this coin is the negative attitude of many first generation Tongan migrants to the lifestyle and values of the host society. Many Tongan families in the diaspora choose to send their children back to Tonga, to learn ‘the Tongan way’ and language and to keep them from overseas influences their parents see as undesirable. Often the young people who are returned have already been in trouble overseas, and their presence in Tonga is creating considerable concern. Part of their impact appears to have been the transnationalisation of youth gangs – as has occurred for Mexican youth who grew up in New York and were returned ‘home’ (Smith, 2002). Yet these young people, most of whom eventually return overseas, may be developing a sense of belonging that makes them more likely to have ongoing transnational connections than those who have spent little or no time in the islands.

For those of the younger generations who are unable or unwilling to spend time in Tonga, there is the possibility of forging stronger connections through information and communications technology (ICT). Part of the reason sites such as Planet Tonga have thus far not generated any significant ‘real life’ connections to Tonga may be that currently only a tiny proportion of Tongans in the islands have access to internet connections; they are mostly excluded from the ‘global’ online community that has been generated. However, there is a strong push to get computers into Tongan schools – this has become a popular target for overseas fundraising ventures – so young people in the islands are likely to gain increasing access to computers and the internet. The move to increase access is supported by Tonga’s Crown Prince, who has
outlined his vision of a ‘fully wired’ Nuku’alofa, which he hopes will put Tonga at ‘the forefront of the Information Technology’ (*Matangi Tonga*, 2001). His plans are ambitious, and beset by obstacles, but the Crown Prince is certainly not alone in believing that ICT has the potential to end the tyranny of distance and isolation, and lack of profitable natural resources, that have impeded Tonga’s economic growth, and to open up new opportunities for businesses, education, tourism, and so on (*Tonga Chronicle*, 1999b). Although his concern is with connecting Tonga more effectively to the rest of the world, ICT also has the potential to enhance and encourage Tongans’ transnational ties.

For the younger generations to remain involved with Tonga, anything that enhances their sense of belonging to the ‘nation’ can only serve to encourage their support of kin and institutions within the state. Yet they can only give their support if they are in a position to do so. Governments of host nations can play a crucial role here, by providing the services and resources needed by their Tongan populations; for example, financing initiatives to improve educational success. As well as assisting Tongans in their efforts to succeed overseas, host governments can offer support to communities attempting to work with their youth, to deal with the various social problems that can lower their chances of success and prevent them from developing secure identities.

Overseas governments can also help by taking in new migrants, in guest worker schemes or, ideally, on a more permanent basis. As well as generating a new source of remittances to balance the likely decline in support from the younger generations, a constant flow of new migrants is highly likely to foster increased transnational ties. These new migrants will help keep the overseas populations motivated and engaged with their homeland’s future, and the younger generations will continue to be aware of Tonga as part of their lives and heritage.

**CONCLUSION**

At present there are many issues of deep concern to Tongans both at home and abroad about the future of their nation. Yet there appears to be a certain complacency when it comes to the issue of remittances, as if they will continue to flow indefinitely. What I have aimed to do in this paper is to highlight the need to remain aware of the extent to which Tonga’s future depends on the younger generations overseas, and on their continuing ties to the islands. My research with these young people in the diaspora has shown that there are significant obstacles to the ongoing maintenance of transnational ties even if members of the younger generations retain emotional connections to the ‘homeland’. This raises serious questions about the likelihood of the continuation of current levels of economic support from the diaspora, and this in turn raises the alarm for Tonga’s economic future.

**NOTES**

1 A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Tongan History Association conference, July 2003, Nuku’alofa, Tonga.
2 Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994: 269) have argued that people who are transnational are not diasporic, since the latter concept implies exile or a loss of ‘homeland’, however I am using the term diaspora in this paper to indicate the globally dispersed population of Tongans, not all of which can be called ‘transnational’.

3 This survey of 100 Tongan households located across the metropolitan area of Melbourne was part of a broader research project focusing on Tongan migration, particularly the impact of migration on constructions of cultural identity (Lee, 2003b). The research was conducted from early 1995 to mid-1999, with financial support from a University of Melbourne Postdoctoral Fellowship, and an Australian Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship held at La Trobe University. In addition to the household surveys, detailed interviews were conducted with Tongans and non-Tongan partners in Melbourne and (via e-mail) across the diaspora. The research also included a study of Tongan participation in internet discussion on Web sites such as the Kava Bowl (now defunct) and Planet Tonga (http://www.planet-tonga.com).

4 In a later paper Marcus points out that the earliest families to create these networks were members of the elite, and that their international family networks helped them to maintain their elite status within Tonga (1981).

5 The Tongan pa’anga is weaker than the Australian dollar; in July 2003 the Australian dollar bought T$1.32, thus the 2002–2003 remittances would have been around AUD$113.6million.

6 Unfortunately Tonga may be the Pacific nation Australia is least willing to involve in a guest worker scheme, given that one of the main objections to the scheme is the possibility of overstayers, and that Tongans have for some time had one of the highest rates of overstaying per capita (Tonga Chronicle, 1999a).

7 Curiously, A Pacific Engaged does not mention the Pacific Islander populations within Australia, or consider what roles they might play in Australia’s relationship with the Islands.

REFERENCES


Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) 2001 Census of Population and Housing. Table CC02: Ancestry by Sex – Persons. Table provided to author by ABS.


*Tonga Chronicle* (1999a, May 27) More Tongans overstay in Australia than any other group, contributing to the world’s highest rate, p. 4.


