Transforming Transnationalism: Second Generation Tongans Overseas*

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Since the 1960s Tongans have developed extensive transnational ties between the homeland and the overseas populations, including remittances that for many years have bolstered Tonga’s economy. This paper examines how these ties have been transformed over time, and focuses on the question of whether the children of Tongan migrants are likely to sustain such ties in the future. Drawing on data collected from ‘second generation’ Tongans in Australia, the paper explores their attitudes towards transnational practices and the extent to which they maintain connections with their parents’ homeland. I argue that although Tonga’s need for support from the diaspora is growing, migrants’ children are unlikely to sustain the current level of remittances. Without an ongoing flow of new migrants, transnational ties are likely to weaken and levels of remittances will suffer a significant decline, with potentially devastating consequences for Tonga.

Tongans have a history of transnationalism stretching back centuries before European contact, when Tongans established ties with islands across the western Pacific, particularly Fiji and Samoa (Campbell, 1992:33; Hau’ofa, 1994; Kaeppler, 1978). Some Tongans went to settle on these other islands, and their transnational activities included return visits to Tonga, and the

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flow of material goods, ideas and cultural practices both to and from Tonga. These transnational ties played a role in the process of cultural transformation for all the island societies involved and their impact can be seen even in today’s Pacific.

In the 1960s, Tongans began to migrate beyond the Pacific in significant numbers, and since then the transnational ties between Tongans at home and overseas have transformed Tongan society far more dramatically than those earlier intra-Pacific connections. As Tongans settled in New Zealand, North America, Australia, and elsewhere, their transnational ties affected every aspect of life at home in the islands, not least the nation’s economy. Today, remittances account for around half of the total foreign income of the country (Lee, 2004b:239) and enable many Tongans in the islands to have lifestyles they could not possibly maintain on their own incomes alone. At the time of writing, the most recently available figures show that in 2006, remittances amounted to TOP208.8 million, or approximately A$125 million.

This paper provides an overview of the transnational ties that have been maintained by Tongans since the 1960s and explores Tongans’ changing attitudes towards such practices. The impact of transnationalism on the people and nation of Tonga is examined, again with a focus on the transformations that have been occurring. Within this discussion of Tongan transnationalism the role of the children of Tongan migrants, the ‘second generation,’ is addressed in order to consider the future of Tonga’s ties with its populations overseas. It is important to include the second generation in any discussion of Tongan transnationalism, as they comprise a significant proportion of the global Tongan population. There are around the same number of Tongans living overseas as in Tonga itself, and of this diasporic population, more than half are overseas-born (Lee, 2003). The 2006 Tongan census showed that the population was 101,134. There are no accurate figures for Tongans overseas (see Lee, 2003:18-19) but most estimates suggest there are at least as many Tongans overseas as in Tonga. Thus far, studies of transnationalism worldwide have tended to neglect the second generation.

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1 The most recent census figures available for Tongan populations in the three main destination countries are: 40,700 in New Zealand in 2001 (Statistics New Zealand, 2003:1); 36,800 in the U.S. (US Census Bureau, 2001:9); and 14,889 in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Note that these figures are highly likely to be underestimates.


This paper demonstrates that it is crucial to take the children of migrants into account when considering the future of both the homeland and the diaspora.

Establishing Transnational Connections

Tongan migration since the 1960s has created extensive networks of transnational connections, primarily kin-based. George Marcus studied this process in the early 1970s and described how these kin networks provided a source of wealth and status for those in Tonga (1974, 1981). He argued that migration transformed the power and prestige structures within Tonga by providing “a potentially new source of elite formation in Tonga, or at least, a source for the appearance of a broader-based Tongan middle class” (1981:55; cf Besnier, 2004; James, 2003). Marcus described these kin networks as “dispersed family estates” with a “readily observable corporate quality” (1974:92, 94). A corporate analogy was also used by Bertram and Watters (1985), who described the “transnational corporations of kin” formed through migration from other Pacific nations. They argued that these nations had “MIRAB” economies: they relied on Migration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy to remain economically viable (see Bertram, 1999 for an overview of this literature).5

Most of the migrants who left Tonga had two primary goals: to improve the life chances of themselves and their children, through education and employment overseas, and to assist kin in the islands, through contributions of money and goods (Cowling, 1990; Small, 1997). If it had been this simple, all would have been well, but migration is a complex and often difficult process, and many who sought these new opportunities overseas found it difficult to achieve any balance between their goals.

In my study of the Tongan diaspora (Lee, 2003), I found that while some migrants are successful overseas and fulfil their goals, many others are unable to move beyond unskilled, poorly paid work and a constant struggle

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4 For an exception, see Levitt and Waters (2002). This collection of papers focuses on second generation transnationalism from the perspective of migrant populations in the United States from Central and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, as does much of the other literature on this topic. Very little attention has been paid to second generation transnationalism within the Pacific.

5 There is a sizable literature on the issue of MIRAB economies in the Pacific, some of which debates whether remittances are likely to decline over time (e.g., Brown, 1998; Poirine, 1998). This literature barely touches on the question of remittances from the second generation. It is also primarily concerned with the economic aspects of transnational ties; my work focuses more on their socio-cultural dimensions.
to survive. Remarkably, even those who live in poverty overseas usually manage to find the means to support their kin in Tonga. Even more remarkably, they also find ways to fulfil a range of other obligations, and it has long been common for Tongan migrants to donate sizable sums to their churches, to nobility and royalty when they visit the overseas communities, and to the endless round of fundraising and gift-giving. Unfortunately, when the desire to help family and church in Tonga and fulfil community obligations overshadows the desire to further their own children’s opportunities, migrants often unwittingly engender resentment in their children, making many determined not to follow in their parents’ footsteps. As shown in this paper, many of the second generation are unwilling to commit fully, if at all, to the obligations and responsibilities their parents’ generation has taken on.

Remittances are only one element of a much broader set of transnational ties, and many Tongans at home and overseas remain connected through phone calls, letters, holidays, the circulation of videos of important events, and other means. These transnational practices sustain kinship ties and, for those overseas, help to maintain a sense of belonging and cultural identity and provide an important source of emotional and social support (Lee, 2004a). As modes of transport and communication improve, Tongans are quick to take advantage; for example, cheaper airline flights have increased movement to and from Tonga, and the advent of the internet offers new ways to stay in touch and share news and gossip (Morton, 1999). Beyond the ties between kin, Tongans overseas retain a range of other ties that also serve to maintain their identification with Tonga, through churches, business connections, ex-students’ associations, kalapu (male kava drinking ‘clubs’)6 and other forms of involvement that collectively can be seen as “long distance nationalism” (Fouron and Glick-Schiller, 2002).

Over time, the kinds of ties Tongans overseas maintain with the homeland have become more varied and complex, as have the effects of such connections. During my first visit to Tonga in 1979, it was easy to tell in every village which families had relatives overseas who had been particularly successful (and generous), because this was displayed in their larger houses and their purchases of vehicles, electrical appliances such as washing machines and many other items. Since then the rate at which consumer goods have arrived in Tonga has been astonishing. To give one example, when I stayed in a rural village in 1986, only one household owned a television and VCR, but when I returned only two years later almost every

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6 Kava is a mildly narcotic drink made from the dried root of the plant *Piper methysticum*. Many Tongan men drink kava, usually in groups, and in the diaspora these groups sometimes raise money to send to Tonga.
household had these and much more. Today, it is far more apparent which families do not have generous kin overseas, because now it is those without displays of wealth that are noticeable.

Some of the more visible changes are the growing number of large houses, often surrounded by high fences for security, the congestion on the roads in the capital, Nuku’alofa, the number of expensive four-wheel drive vehicles, the retail outlets stocked with an ever-expanding range of consumer items, and the fashionable clothes worn by many, particularly young people. Since the early days of migration money also has been channelled into Tonga’s churches and this has continued, along with increasing amounts of support to the nation’s schools. High schools, particularly, have improved considerably through donations from ex-students’ associations and other groups, for projects such as the establishment of well-equipped computer and science laboratories.

These changes are not equally evident throughout the kingdom, however, and the inflow of money and goods is most apparent on the main island of Tongatapu and especially in Nuku’alofa. When I visited Tonga in 2005 and travelled around Tongatapu, the ubiquitous bright yellow stickers and signs of Western Union, one of the key channels for remittances, were glaring symbols of the transnational ties that affect every sphere of life in the kingdom, and of the international corporations that benefit from such ties. Beyond Tongatapu the signs of change are not so readily apparent, but the impact of remittances remains significant. Mike Evans (2001) shows that for villagers on the remote rural island of Ha’ano in the Ha’apai group, remittances are by far their largest source of household income.

The changes wrought through Tongan transnationalism are local manifestations of a global pattern. As Steven Vertovec has argued, “transnational connections have considerable economic, socio-cultural and political impacts on migrants, their families and collective groups, and the dual (or more!) localities in which they variably dwell” (2001:575; see also Basch et al., 1994; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998). What Vertovec observes of remittances, in particular, could well have been written of Tonga:

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7 Churches are the center of most Tongans’ lives as they play important social as well as religious functions. Funds sent to churches support ministers and their families, build and maintain churches and finance various community projects. The main church in Tonga is the Wesleyan church, and other churches with significant numbers include Roman Catholic, Mormon and Free Church of Tonga.

8 Not only are money and goods sent to Tonga, but also many fund-raising tours are organized visiting different Tongan communities overseas to raise money for new sports uniforms, brass band instruments, school improvements and so on.
The money migrants send not only critically supports families, but may progressively rework gender relations, support education and the acquisition of professional skills and facilitate local community development through new health clinics, water systems, places of worship and sports facilities. Remittances may also undermine local labour markets, fuel price increases, create new status hierarchies and generate patterns of economic dependence (2001:575).

As remittances have continued to pour into Tonga, the ways in which they are sent has diversified. Not only have the number of official channels increased (McKenzie, 2006) but unofficial transfers of money and goods have also become more varied. By the early 1990s Richard Brown and John Connell (1993) had noted the move towards sending container loads of goods, rather than just money, which provided items for resale at Tonga’s second-hand goods markets (see also Besnier, 2004). In return, “contraflows” of island produce and handicrafts are sent overseas for use within the Tongan communities or for resale (James, 1997). This appears to be part of a trend towards seeing remittances as part of two-way transnational flows that can benefit all involved, rather than as altruistic gifts from the diaspora to Tonga. In a study of Tongan migrants in New Zealand, David McKenzie estimated that the flow of goods, and even some cash, from Tonga to these migrants equalled an average of 43 percent of the value of their remittances to Tonga (2006). My current research, described below, indicates that some in the second generation prefer this form of engagement with Tonga, although there are limited opportunities for this, given the narrow range of goods produced in Tonga. In addition to this move towards more mutually beneficial arrangements, remitters have increasingly seen their contributions to family at home as a form of investment, whether to maintain their land rights, for personal investment in income generating ventures, or even to prepare for retirement in Tonga. Transnational connections remain primarily kin-based rather than nation-based, however there has been a shift from ‘corporate’ kin networks to more individualistic ties (James, 1993).

There also has been a growing tendency to send money directly to its intended destination; for example, by sending money earmarked for school fees directly to the school, or by spending money overseen on behalf of those in Tonga, such as buying airfares or insurance for them. Those who contribute remittances seem to be attempting to exert more control over how their hard-earned money is used, and to some extent this reflects a growing resentment about the ways remittances are spent and the very assumption that financial support can be expected from the diaspora.
Ambivalence and Resentment: Shifting Attitudes to Transnationalism

In her study of one extended family’s transnational ties between a Tongan village and the US, Cathy Small observed the resentment that, although often carefully hidden, could be detected in both senders and recipients. She wrote of “the obvious signs of stress” (1997:197):

Tensions were apparent daily in the village in 1995. They surfaced as interpersonal problems, taking the form of everyday disappointments, resentments, misunderstandings, annoyances, betrayals, and anger. They were evident in the look on the face of a returned migrant who discovered the misuse of his village house and in the tone of the village woman who complained how migration was leaving the village unkempt and untended. Tensions appeared again in the cool distance between American-born Tongans and Tongan islanders of their own generation.

Small noted that such tensions were also evident in the United States, with a common complaint of the people in Tonga “‘eating money,’ meaning that they were redirecting resources meant for the common good into private consumption” (1997:197).

Many overseas Tongans, both migrants and their children, are becoming cynical about the widely held assumption that those overseas are better off than their Tongan counterparts. For decades this assumption has been perpetuated by the flow of remittances - if they can send money, they must be better off - and by the tendency of migrants who visit Tonga to make overt displays of wealth, by wearing expensive, fashionable clothes and generously distributing gifts. Yet the common reality, of lives spent in hardship in order to send remittances or to put on a good front when visiting Tonga, is now more readily acknowledged, perhaps in part because migrants’ children are voicing their resentment about having suffered as a result. I have found that such resentment is widespread and has been a key topic of discussion on the popular Internet discussion forums established by younger Tongans, such as Planet Tonga (www.planet-tonga.com).

The same resentment continues to be expressed (albeit often in the form of jokes used to disguise negatively valued emotions) and increasingly comes from migrants themselves as well as their children. At a meeting of a Tongan community group in Adelaide in March 2006, several older Tongans commented on this, joking that when they visited relatives in Tonga they were tempted to bring back some of the luxury household goods that were in plentiful supply compared to their own homes in Australia. They also referred to a story published in the Taimi ‘o Tonga newspaper
about a family from California that had sent remittances to Tonga for years, going without many things in order to support their “poor” family in Tonga (Moala, 2006). The article described the family eventually visiting Tonga, so the children could see their parents’ homeland, and their shock to see the family in Tonga with mobile phones, the latest fashions, store-bought food and two cars, despite the fact that many of them had no paid work. Kalafi Moala, who wrote the story to make a point about the practice of remitting, wrote, “It was the nature of the family in Tonga that whenever they wanted anything, even any meaningless thing, they would phone overseas and tell them. And those who lived overseas would feel guilty if they didn’t help. They would put their needs aside and send money to Tonga.”

Rejecting the Burden: Second Generation Practices

Many in the second generation are resentful that, like the children in Moala’s article, they went without because of their parents’ remittance practices. Often they also begrudge the time their parents committed to activities that at least partially concerned the provision of financial and other support to Tonga, such as church and community associations. After hearing many young people describe such feelings and claim to be unwilling to replicate their parents’ behavior I commenced research in 2005 to ascertain what levels of support those in the second generation are willing to provide to Tonga, and what forms of transnational ties they maintain. The project involves the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data in Australia and Tonga. In Australia, data collection included conducting in-depth interviews of second generation Tongans aged between 18 and 30 in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, Mildura and Sydney to collect demographic and socio-economic data and information on their transnational practices over one year. In Tonga, interviews were conducted with 18-30 year olds residing in Tonga, many of whom have family members living overseas, and returned migrants. In addition, I also conducted e-mail interviews and examined web-based discussion lists. At the time of writing, April 2007, data collection is almost complete and includes 151 interviews in Australia and 54 in Tonga.

Data from the 151 ‘second generation’ Tongans in various locations in Australia show that they hold a wide range of attitudes and practices. Broadly speaking, they fall into three groups:

1) Some do not remit at all, and have little or no connection with anyone in Tonga. Within this group, a small minority choose this position deliberately, because they disapprove of the practice of remitting, while others simply have no ties to anyone in Tonga, as most of their family has migrated, or they are too immersed in their lives overseas to feel any
connection or obligation to anyone in Tonga. This group comprises 31.1 percent (N = 47) of the participants, 42.5 percent of them female, 57.5 percent male.

2) Others have some connection to Tonga and occasionally make contributions of money or goods, usually to only one or two kinsfolk or friends. Their transnational ties are far weaker than those of their parents and many give only when they are asked. They typically feel an emotional connection to Tonga but no strong sense of obligation or responsibility to support the people or nation. This is the largest group: 59.6 percent (N = 90) of the total, with 62.2 percent female and 37.8 percent male. Within this group, over one year, 64 interviewees sent money, 36 sent goods, and 31 sent both. For those who sent money, the amounts of money remitted ranged from A$50 to A$3000, with an average of A$788.

3) A small group more actively maintains transnational ties; however, these ties are still weaker than those of their parents. For some, this does not involve any financial element, but others do make substantial contributions, usually to immediate family members such as parents or siblings. The degree to which they do so willingly varies considerably, with some finding it a burden hindering their more individualistic desires, while others find it fulfilling and integral to their sense of being ‘Tongan.’ This group comprises only 9.3 percent (N = 14) of the participants (85.7 percent female, 14.3 percent male). In one year, two sent goods while the rest sent money ranging from A$200 to A$14,200, with an average of A$4,300.

These categories are, of course, complicated by the fact that individuals may move between them as they reach different stages of their lives, and as changes occur within their kin group due to deaths, migrations, and so on. Some factors clearly influence remitting practices, particularly pressure from parents who may make direct demands for contributions from adult children to send their own remittances. Those with immediate family members residing in Tonga, or relatives such as father’s sisters, who are entitled to make demands for support, are also more likely to remit and maintain other ties, and females are generally more likely to engage in transnational practices.

However, other factors that may seem likely to encourage transnational ties, such as spending time in Tonga as a child or adolescent, do not have any predictable effect (see James, 1993). The strength of participants’ identification as Tongan and their degree of attachment to the ‘homeland’ also do not have any clear, direct influence on transnational practices. Amongst those who do maintain ties, these ties are, as indicated above, weaker than those of their parents, as well as narrower. Very few maintain ties beyond friends or closely related kin, and these tend to be people with whom they feel some special connection. Often their connections to relatives elsewhere in the
diaspora, both interstate and overseas, are much closer due to the greater ease of communication. These intra-diasporic connections are also more appealing because they are less likely to involve financial obligations.

Whatever their actual remitting practices, no participants express a belief that Tonga does not need remittances, and all share the same pessimistic forecast for Tonga should remittance levels decline. Their predictions tend to be dramatic. The most common view is that people in Tonga would not be able to survive.

If their families overseas don’t send anything, they are going to just keep getting poorer and eventually die (female, 21 y/o, Adelaide).

They would go bust and they would probably starve (female, 27 y/o, Melbourne).

There would probably be like an overthrowing of the king or something! (female, 28 y/o, Melbourne).

There’s not that much there already and we if don’t send anything, then it will just be like Africa or something. Like, no-one will eat or anything (female, 18, Adelaide).9

Many are well aware that the Tongan economy is already in trouble. Sela’s thoughts on the matter are not uncommon10 (female, 20 y/o, Adelaide):

I think that their economy would collapse. I mean I know they’re about to collapse, but I think it would just tip it over, because I think they’re hanging on a bar of thread at the moment . . . before anyone stops sending, the country needs to like, the economy has to be flourishing before people stop doing it . . . personally I do think if everyone stops sending them things, it’d just go to almost to the point where you have no control. No way of them getting out again, you know. They’re probably getting towards the edge of the, edge of the knife. They’re about to fall off.

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9 The predominance of quotations from female participants is due to their tendency to be more forthcoming in interviews. Also, there some bias towards females in the sample: 88 females and 63 males.

10 Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
Acknowledging Tongans Overseas

While they recognize the problems associated with a decline in remittances, many of these young people do not believe it is up to them to maintain the present levels of support from the diaspora. As those who left Tonga in the early waves of migration get older, their capacity to remit will inevitably decline. Thus, for remittance levels to remain high – and increase along with demand from within Tonga – either the second generation must be convinced to take on their parents’ role or the number of new migrants from Tonga must be increased as this will help ensure a continuous flow of remittances at a sustainable level. As neither of these options currently seems likely, a drop in remittance levels may be inevitable.

As Tonga faces a potential decline in remittances the overseas communities are being given more recognition than ever before by the Tongan government. However, this is not necessarily because of a fear of such a decline, since many in Tonga continue to believe the remittance flow is endless, but because the country’s economic and political woes are forcing the government to acknowledge that Tongans overseas are needed, and not only for their money. A daunting list of problems creates overwhelming challenges for the nation of Tonga, including a dire economic situation; increasing political instability; a range of socio-cultural problems such as rising rates of crime and domestic violence, high youth unemployment and substance abuse; as well as other problems such as continuing degradation of the environment. In November 2006, Tongans’ frustration with the government’s inability to deal with such problems contributed to riots in which most of the commercial center of Nuku’alofa was destroyed by deliberately lit fires. The devastation caused by the riots has added to Tonga’s problems and further increased pressure on the diaspora for support.

Even before the events of November 2006, the Tongan government was increasingly aware of the need to engage in nation re-building, and regarded those in the diaspora as playing a valuable role in this process. Soon after Dr. Feleti Sevele was appointed Prime Minister in March 2006, he announced the formation of a Department for Tongans Abroad within his office. A government press release referred to the more than TOP200 million (around US$98 million) received in remittances annually, and quoted Dr. Sevele saying “the overall significance of maintaining and strengthening the links between Tonga and her people overseas cannot be overemphasized” (Government Information Unit, 2006a). The release stated that the department would “look after the interests and concerns of Tongans overseas” and “foster closer and stronger relationships between Tonga and her people overseas. It is also a response in gratitude to the many ways in which
our people overseas have contributed to the development of the country.” Significantly, one of the aims of the move is “to attract investment from Tongans overseas, especially young, educated and financially well off Tongans in other countries.”

Prior to his appointment as Prime Minister, Dr. Sevele was interviewed in the Tongan news magazine *Matangi Tonga* in his capacity as Minister of Labor, Commerce and Industries. He described Tonga’s economy as “at rock bottom... It is grim. Call it a recession or what, but it is bad” (*Matangi Tonga*, 2006a). As an economist, Dr. Sevele would be well aware of the ongoing debate about the sustainability of remittances in the literature about MIRAB economies, and his decision to form the Department for Tongans Abroad may well be, at least in part, an attempt to ensure that remittances continue to bolster Tonga’s economy.

A six-week long public servants’ strike, which ended on 5 September 2005, dramatically highlighted the important role of overseas Tongans, as it was their donations of money, food and other goods that helped support the strikers through those weeks without income, and their vocal support of the cause helped to boost morale and strengthen the strikers’ resolve. The outcome of the strike was a guaranteed wage rise averaging 70 percent for public servants, and voluntary redundancy packages that have been taken up by 815 government employees (*ABC Asia Pacific News*, 2006a). This has placed further stress on an already struggling economy, and in an address at the end of 2005, the Minister for Finance, Siosiua ‘Utoikamanu, acknowledged that the country’s fiscal position faced “sharp deterioration” unless savings could be made to fund these costs (2006:16). He stated:

The projected large fiscal deficit for 2006/07, if left unmanaged in light of strong credit growth, may have adverse flow-on effects throughout the economy, triggering a balance of payments crisis, placing downward pressure on the level of foreign reserves and the exchange rate, while placing upward pressure on inflation. Without sufficient revenue sources to meet its commitments, the government may have to scale back the level of public services, exacerbating the economic and financial downturn (2006:16).

Economic downturn, a reduction in public services, and the aftermath of the devastation in Nuku’alofa are placing increasing pressure on those in the diaspora to support their families in Tonga. Government moves to deal with the economic crisis may also lead to a higher involvement from Tongans overseas, although in this case only wealthy expatriates will be targeted. One of the government’s strategies to raise revenue is to sell many of its assets, including its 40 percent share in the Westpac Bank in Tonga, the phone company, the post office and the government newspaper, the *Tonga...*
Chronicle (ABC Asia Pacific News, 2006b). The government hopes some of these assets will be purchased by Tongans residing in Tonga, but will also seek expressions of interest from outside the country, and has specifically indicated its hope this will include some overseas Tongans. Tongans overseas are being presented with a significant opportunity to become directly involved in nation-building and it will be interesting to observe whether this opportunity is grasped, and by whom.

Yet another indication of the increased recognition being given to the diaspora is the tour that was being undertaken by Prince Tu’ipelehake, who was Chairman of the National Committee for Political Reform (NCPR), and nephew of the king (Fonua, 2006). The Prince was visiting Tongan communities across the diaspora to seek their views on political reform when, tragically, the Prince, his wife, Princess Kaimana, and their driver, Vinisia Hefa, were killed on 5 July 2006, in a car accident just outside San Francisco. Before travelling to the US, the Prince had visited Australia, and heard the views of many Tongans including those at a meeting held at Melbourne’s Canterbury Uniting Church on 22 June, at which he was presented with a document prepared by a resident of Melbourne, Mr. Sione Tapani Mangisi, entitled, “A new Tongan democracy: Proposal for political reform in the Kingdom of Tonga” (Matangi Tonga, 2006b). The Prince was to return to Tonga with such proposals, so they could be factored into the development of the NCPR’s strategies for change. However, the death of Prince Tu’ipelehake was followed by the death of the elderly King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV in September 2006 and succession to the throne by King George Tupou V. At this stage it is unclear what direction the new king will take with regard to political reform, and the riots only two months after his succession have created even greater uncertainty about Tonga’s political and economic future.

Whatever the outcome of recent events, overseas Tongans are being recognized as potentially contributing to processes of reform, and there is an increasing willingness within Tonga to include the diaspora in the process of nation rebuilding. The question this raises, however, is where the children of Tongan migrants fit into these developments. How many of them actually want to play a part in this process, and even if they do, will there be opportunities for their views to be heard? If so, will their views on the kinds of reforms needed clash with those of the older generations both within Tonga and overseas? How many will be excluded from the process by factors as simple as their lack of Tongan language? The obstacles I have identified for second generation transnationalism, such as the socio-economic problems within the diaspora, high rates of intermarriage, and ambivalent relationships with their parents’ homeland (Lee, 2004b), are likely to also prevent their participation in processes of national reform and development.
Never Too Late? The Relationship of the Second Generation to Tonga

It is difficult to know what involvement with Tonga will be maintained by members of the second generation as they get older. Within the cohort of 18 to 30 year olds participating in my research, there is little indication that their ties with Tonga will increase with age, nor do they express much interest in issues related to nation building. Those interviewed thus far do not hold strong views on contentious issues such as whether Tongans overseas should retain their rights to land, or whether they should be able to vote in Tongan elections or otherwise have a say in Tonga's future direction. They do not regard themselves as having any role to play in the process of political reform, and their responses to interview questions often express a deep cynicism about the royal family, the government, and the general state of affairs in Tonga.

Many older Tongans would be deeply shocked by the comments some interviewees made in response to a question about their sense of responsibility or obligation to the royal family.11 Anna exclaimed: “I don’t want my name affiliated with those people. They can get stuffed for all I care…being a Tongan here in Australia, they can get stuffed for all I care. I do not care” (female, 21 y/o, Adelaide). Litia said: “I just don’t like the royal family. I don’t agree with their politics and their way of thinking. They’re very greedy… They just want things for themselves instead of for their people” (female, 24 y/o, Adelaide). When asked whether she would want her children to feel any obligation to the royals, Litia replied emphatically:

Hell no. I don’t want my children to be trying to support the royal family. Probably by then, hopefully my fingers crossed, that the royal family will be out on their asses by then and a whole new government set up in Tonga. So when my children come along, they can see a home that’s so much [more] beautiful and well established and well supported and so they can enjoy that. They can enjoy that better.

Many participants explained that their negative views of Tonga’s political and economic situation prevent them from wanting to live in Tonga. David, when asked if he would like to live there, replied: “its too different, too much poverty” (male, 19 y/o, Melbourne). Another participant, Amy, said: “It’s a third world country, so I wouldn’t wanna livethere” (female, 18 y/o, Adelaide). Some even claimed the current situation in

11 The comments reported here were made before the death of King Taufa’ahau Tupou V.
Tonga put off short-term stays. When asked if he would like to visit Tonga in the near future Jay answered: “not at the moment because if you see all the situation happening in Tonga, like the royal family and things. So I’d rather go there when it’s quiet because, I think of going to Tonga as like a holiday. We go there and relax and just eat all the food and do nothing” (male, 23 y/o, Adelaide).

This last comment, referring to Tonga as a holiday destination, was echoed by many others despite their common perception of Tonga as a “third world country.” Pita spoke of the “easy living style, laid back living style in Tonga” (male, 19 y/o, Brisbane). Anna, quoted earlier, praised Tonga’s “natural beauty” and idealized “the simple life” in a country where “everything’s less complicated” and “old-fashioned.” She continued:

I love the friendliness and the respect and stuff and the value of the moral grounds cause that’s the one, the best thing really about, that I have for me is the moral standing which is thank Tonga for that. Yeah, but I’ll go back purely for holidays. I don’t think I wanna live there, ‘cause the economy is completely [makes a sound indicating decline], but yeah. But to go [for] holidays and just relax. You know, go back to enjoying the simple things, that would be nice.

For many, their connections with Tonga involve occasional holidays or visits through church groups, during which some seek romantic relationships with “real” Tongans. From their base overseas they make phone calls, e-mail friends and family with Internet access, and send CDs, DVDs, items of clothing and other small gifts. Some admit that when particular relatives pass away, their connections will end, while others express hopes of more holidays, or even short periods of working in the kingdom if they can find work with what they consider adequate wages.

Nevertheless, almost all consider both Australia and Tonga to be their homes and identify as both Australian and Tongan. Despite their desire to identify as Tongan, some find they are not fully acknowledged as Tongan, which can contribute to the resentment described above and the reluctance to engage in transnational ties, particularly remittances. If, however, their status as “real” Tongans was acknowledged, they could be encouraged to develop a more active involvement with their parents’ homelands, raising the possibility that they would increase their transnational ties, which in turn could lead to a greater level of economic support than currently seems likely.

The moves to acknowledge ‘Tongans abroad’ by dedicating a government department to their interests, inviting them to express their views on political reform and opening business opportunities could contribute to this, as could the approval by Privy Council in June 2006 of the principle of
dual citizenship for Tongans. A government press release following the announcement of this decision quoted the Prime Minister saying: “Government is moving systematically to construct a framework for revitalizing and nourishing the very warm and enduring bonds of kinship and family that is still strong between the Tongan people, no matter where they live” (Government Information Unit, 2006b). The press release included reactions from Tongans overseas that reveal the problems the existing law has created – one expressed joy “that my kids will one day be recognized in writing that they’re Tongans;” another said, “We can now, once again, call Tonga–home!” and yet another expressed, “thank you, Tonga, for allowing us to be Tongan again.” One comment sent to the government in response to the announcement stated: “our children can at least say they are Tongans too. When trying to teach them the language, their reasons for not having any interest is, why now, ‘we’re not recognized as Tongans’” (Government Information Unit, 2006b).

For the increased recognition of Tongans overseas to encourage the children of migrants to develop stronger connections with their parents’ homelands, it is important to take into consideration the significant differences between these generations. One important area of difference lies in their perceptions and internalization of ‘Tongan values.’ Members of the second generation may express their admiration for values such as respect and generosity but they reinterpret them from their own perspectives, which inevitably have been influenced by growing up outside Tonga. Many do not share their parents’ deep and often unquestioning sense of obligation and responsibility to kin and country. Kerry James (1997:21) has noted: “A general feeling of fetokoni’aki (helping one another and particularly relatives) remains integral to Tongan identity in overseas communities (see also Fuka, 1985; Vete, 1995). To the extent that it does, there may still be said to exist a moral community overseas.” Certainly, some in the second generation do belong to that moral community, but others choose to opt out of it. This is a potential new source of resentment between the younger Tongans in the islands and overseas. Litia, quoted earlier, was born in Australia to a Tongan father and Australian mother, and returned to Tonga with her family for her schooling. She now lives in Australia while she pursues a tertiary education, and commented on the second generation Tongans she has met in Australia:

This new generation of Tongans, most of them don’t know shit about Tonga. They do not know. They pretend to know and, which really pisses me off ’cause I’ll come over here and I’ll talk to Tongans here and they’re like: ‘Tonga’s this’ and ‘Tonga’s that,’ and I grew
up there and I’m like: ‘No, Tonga is not like that. It needs your help,’ and they’re like: ‘who gives a shit?’

Even those whose attitudes are more generous often emphasize that if they do contribute money and goods they do so out of choice, rather than a sense of obligation. They also feel less vulnerable to shame and gossip, the informal social controls that help motivate people to remit; indeed they are often critical of these mechanisms and of the hierarchical kinship and broader social relations that underlie their parents’ feelings of responsibility and obligation. Their responses to interview questions about their sense of obligation and what expectations they would have of their own children often reveal a strong belief in free choice. Moana said if she had children: “I reckon I’ll give them the choice to do that. Yeah, but they’ll take example from me, if they choose to and if they don’t want to that’s, that’s their choice” (female, 18 y/o, A delaide).

Other participants express a strong resistance to the notion of obligation. For example, Litia sends money occasionally to her grandmother and said she would like her children to be willing to help kin who are in difficulty. However, she added: “I don’t want them to have any pressure of feeling, oh, they’re obligated to send money or they’re obligated to do this and this and this. ‘Cause I don’t like feeling like that myself and I don’t want my children to feel like that.” Anna described her father’s disappointment that she and her siblings “have the least amount of ties possible with them over there.” When asked what obligations she would want her children to have to family in Tonga, she replied: “None. None whatsoever. I don’t want them to have any obligation. If there is, if it’s supposed to be called an obligation, then love is the only thing, you know. But that’s not an obligation. So, none whatsoever.”

Appealing to the second generation as part of a “moral community” of Tongans (James, 1997: 21) is unlikely to generate stronger connections to their parents’ homeland if this is couched in terms of obligation and responsibility rather than choice. Many are willing to “help” but do not wish this to be imposed on them, particularly when they perceive they are being exploited. What seems more likely to increase their transnational ties is recognition of them as “real” Tongans, acknowledgment of the value of their contributions to Tonga, and a willingness to include them in the processes of nation building. The stark reality is, however, that many in the second generation, and probably even more in subsequent generations, will not maintain ties with Tonga to the extent that has occurred with the “first generation,” the migrants who spent their formative years in the kingdom. The indications are that their ties will be weaker, narrower, and focused more on emotional than economic connections.
Conclusion

Transnational ties have profoundly transformed the Pacific kingdom of Tonga, and in the period in which these ties have been developed they too have undergone considerable transformation. New forms of remitting have emerged, and new attitudes have developed in which more remitters are attempting to exert some control over the ways their contributions are used, including seeking an element of gain for themselves. As communications technology develops and cheaper airfares become available, connections to Tonga through visits, phone calls, and e-mail become easier to sustain, and the links between Tonga and the diaspora are, at present, both strong and diverse. The evidence of these transnational connections can be seen everywhere in Tonga, in remote rural communities and even more so on the main island and in Nuku’alofa.

To an extent, the children of migrants participate in the transnational networks that have formed over the decades since significant migration from Tonga began. Some travel to Tonga for visits, some are sent there as children and adolescents to stay with family members for varying lengths of time, and some maintain contact with particular kinfolk through phone calls and, increasingly, e-mail. Some also participate in the practice of remitting that migrants thus far have sustained at high enough levels to constitute a major proportion of the nation’s foreign income.

However, my research with the Tongan diaspora over a decade provides evidence that many in the second generation, and even more in subsequent generations, are unlikely to remit at such levels, if at all, even if they maintain other forms of transnational ties. Certainly, some who are currently remitting intend to maintain this practice, but at levels well below those of their parents, and many others do not remit at all and have no plans to do so in future. My belief is that Tonga has reached the peak of remittance levels and while they may plateau and remain high for the immediate future, they are likely to decline in the longer term. Given that within Tonga the demand for remittances is growing, with people’s ever increasing consumerism and ambitions for more “western” lifestyles, it will not be too long before demand will outstrip supply. Without high levels of remittances from these and subsequent generations, one of the only realistic means to circumvent this problem is to have a significantly higher level of new migration, which would create an ongoing source of new remitters. If this does not occur, a new pattern of transformation is likely to emerge, in which Tonga will be forced to seek ways to counteract the decline in support from its diaspora or face a bleaker future of an already dire economic situation. This may be a “worst case scenario” but it is one that at least needs to be considered, to counteract the current complacence about transnational ties and
the widespread assumption within Tonga that there will be a never-ending, ever-increasing flow of remittances.

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