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Langa Fonua: In Search of Success

**How a Tongan *Kainga* Strived to be
Socially and Economically Successful in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of

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Sione Tu'itahi

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"Blessed is the spot...where mention of God hath been made and His praise glorified."

Abstract¹

In search of social and economic success, Tongans started to migrate to New Zealand more than 40 years ago. Government studies and other research show that Tongans and other Pacific ethnic minorities are on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder (Statistics New Zealand, 2002a; Pacific Directions Report, 1999). In the midst of these negative statistics, there are pockets of success, but no detailed research has been conducted in this area (Pacific Directions Report, 1999).

This thesis explores the diverse perspectives on and attitudes to, social and economic success in four generations of a migrant Tongan *kainga* (extended family). It examines the insights and understanding of this particular *kainga* of the concept of success, and analyses the values and motives that drive them to achieve it. It investigates the strategies they employ to achieve goals, the challenges they face, and why they are successful.

An exploratory study, this thesis argues that more research should be conducted on the socio-economic success of Tongans. Findings from such research can inform policies and strategies for socio-economic development for Tongan families and community groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. This research will contribute to the construction of a larger and more representative study of successful Tongan *kainga* that can inform the development of social and economic policies for Tongans in New Zealand.

¹ A Tongan translation of the Abstract is attached as Appendix One

Introduction²

The majority of Tongans, and other Pacific peoples, in New Zealand are currently at the lowest level of the socio-economic hierarchy in New Zealand society. While policies have been set and implemented to remedy this socio-economic disparity, no studies have been done on the experience of the successful minority, which, while exposed to the same socio-economic forces, is more socially and economically successful. Although exploratory, this thesis aims to offer insights by identifying the factors that contribute to the success, and achievement of one such part of that minority. This chapter provides a brief snapshot of the socio-economic status of Pacific peoples, including Tongans, and argues for research on the experience of the successful few.

Tongan Socio-Economic Status In New Zealand

The low socio-economic status of the majority of Tongans and other Pacific peoples in New Zealand and the contributing factors has been well documented over the past two decades (Statistics New Zealand, 2002a; Pacific Directions Report, 1999). This disadvantage is apparent across a range of key social indicators. In health, for example, the Ministry of Health (2004) noted that compared with the total New Zealand population, Pacific peoples have poorer health status, are more exposed to risk factors for poor health, and experience barriers to accessing health. It further noted that, 'Pacific peoples in New Zealand currently experience an independent life expectancy at birth of approximately of 62.5 years, about four years less than the national average' (Pacific Health Chart Book 2004, p. xxix).

² A Tongan translation of the Introduction is attached as Appendix Two

The low socio-economic status of Pacific peoples is also demonstrated in their level of income and type of accommodation. According to the New Zealand Census 2001 the real median annual income of Pacific peoples, age 15 and above was \$14,800, while the median income for the total New Zealand population was \$18,600.

The census also revealed that:

- The median annual income for adult males of Pacific ethnicity was \$17,800, nearly \$5,000 more than the median of \$13,000 for females.
- 1 in 6 adults of Pacific ethnicity had a tertiary qualification as their highest qualification.
- Nearly 2 in 3 adults of Pacific ethnicity were in the labour force.
- 4 in 5 employed adults of Pacific ethnicity worked full time.
- The most common occupation groups for adults of Pacific ethnicity was plant and machine operators and assemblers (12,804), followed by service and sales workers (11,382), and clerks (11,097) (Statistics New Zealand, 2002a, p. 11).

Furthermore, only 26 per cent of Pacific peoples own their own homes, compared to 55 per cent for the national population. Housing conditions are also worse for Pacific peoples, with 21 per cent living with more than two occupants per bedroom, compared to three per cent of the national population. The census also revealed that:

Nearly a third (31 percent) of Fijian adults (aged 15 years and over) stated that they owned or partly owned their own home. For Tuvaluan people, a less established population, the equivalent proportion was 16 percent. By comparison, 26 percent of the total Pacific adult population, and 55 percent of the New Zealand adult population owned or partly owned their own home in 2001. The younger age structure of the Pacific ethnic groups is a contributing factor to this difference. The levels of home ownership among the remaining major Pacific ethnic groups were: Samoan (27 percent), Niuean (25 percent), Cook Island Maori (24 percent) Tongan (23 percent), and Tokelauan (22 percent) (Statistics New Zealand, 2002a, p. 12).

Successive governments have been responding to these problems, especially over the last two decades. Acts were amended, policies were approved with structures to implement strategies and related action plans. For example, the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs was restructured in the late

1990s, and took up an advisory role to Government and to all ministries to ensure they defined Pacific objectives and established programs to deliver measurable milestones for Pacific populations. Under this role, the ministry collaborated with other government departments and established the Pacific Capacity Building initiative: the policy framework that guides government departments to respond to Pacific peoples' socio-economic needs. As a result, most ministries now have Pacific strategies with Pacific staff to implement their respective plans³. The Ministry of Health, for instance, has its Pacific Health and Disability Plan in place while the Tertiary Education Commission has a specific Pacific strategy in its overall Strategic Plan for the tertiary education sector.

As briefly described above, this response to address Pacific issues is based on the analysis of its negative socio-economic status. It is a problem-focused approach. While focusing on the deficits of Tongans and other Pacific peoples results in understanding of underlying causes and produces more appropriate remedies, focusing solely on the deficit has disadvantages. For example, accentuating the negative creates a negative image (Smith, 1999; Helu-Thaman, 2002) that can influence the dominant group's expectations of the group, and can further undermine the self-worth of the researched, which is already a marginalized minority group. Although it is factual, focussing on aggregated data masks the ways in which the social capital of successful sub-groups within the population contributes to the economic utilization of meagre resources. That approach also masks the ways in which sharing and reciprocity lift the social and economic status of a whole *kainga*, rather than its accumulation in one nuclear family at the expense of others in the same extended family unit. Similarly, other such insights that are based on proven strengths and which can offer hints as to how best to work with, and help Pacific peoples, are not identified. In short, only part of the story is told. In many instances, the untold part may be of great importance to the researched

³ See the website of the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, <http://www.minpac.govt.nz/>, for links to these strategies

since it may hold the key to effective approaches to both understanding and transforming their situation.

The study of those models and of the processes which are adopted in these successful sub-groups can contribute to a more balanced and complete story of Tongan settlement, and provide a counter-balancing academic narrative. The resulting insights and understandings can also inform future policies on social and economic development for Tongans in New Zealand. Durie (2003) argues for such a balance with regards to Maori development. He writes:

The balance between a deficit model and a model of positive development needs to be struck (a move towards the positive is required if real progress is to be made) otherwise there is a risk that policies will be formulated only on the basis of Maori being a marginalised minority (Durie, 2003, p. 160).

Shifting Focus to Positive

Although exploratory, this thesis attempts to draw lessons from the experiences of successful Tongans for the reasons which have been discussed earlier. The review of relevant literature (as discussed in Chapter One) confirmed that no academic research or studies of the social and economic success of Tongan groups and individuals in New Zealand had been conducted. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that some Tongan groupings in New Zealand, especially some *kainga* have demonstrated on-going success (Tu'itahi, 1998).

The *kainga* is regarded by the majority of Tongans as the basic social unit, (Mahina, 1992; Helu, 1999) hence the decision to conduct this study on an extended family. Other researchers agree. As Vaden (1998) writes:

In spite of the impacts of emigration and western society, the *kainga* (extended family) still stands as the backbone of Tongan society. The *kainga*, at its best, can be a wonderful example of cooperative beings working together to survive. On the other hand excessive family demands and in-fighting can smother individual creativity and wreak havoc with individual professional pursuits (Vaden, 1998, pp.126-127).

But not all *kainga* are, as the quote above implies, as 'successful' as each other. This raises the important question of what makes some *kainga* more 'successful' than others. This is best revealed by detailed study of a particular *kainga* that has succeeded, and may reveal which, of a number of possible factors, makes the crucial difference. The *kainga* at the centre of this study includes four generations. It includes great grandparents, parents, nine of their eleven children and their partners, and ten grand children (17 years of age and above) in New Zealand. For the purpose of confidentiality, this *kainga* is named the Tahi *kainga*.

The decision to conduct the research with this particular *kainga* was based of the following additional reasons:

- many of its members have been successful in education, business, or in their professions or trades, and have overcome the challenges and seized opportunities which migration has presented. In this respect, this *kainga* is successful than many other Tongan extended families, and may therefore contain the key to understanding why this is the case.
- members of the *kainga* gave their consent and were very supportive of this research. The *kainga* was happy to share its experience as a contribution to the building of knowledge that can assist in the overall development of Tongans and other migrants.
- A level of mutual trust between the researcher and the *kainga* members as participants was already high and well established.

This case study approach provides in-depth insights to the worldview of a Tongan *kainga*, and into how Tongan *kainga* structure and organisation, can provide a platform for collective success in an individualistic and materialistic society. It provides a more accurate understanding to how members perceive and define "success". It reveals the values, inspirations and motives that made them

migrate, work, pool together resources to buy properties, and set up educational schemes to educate *kainga* members. It shows how the *kainga* structure provided a basis for these activities. It also examines tensions within the *kainga* as it adapts to new circumstances and looks into the future. There is no scope in this thesis to provide insights to extended families that are not successful.