

Sociology 213
Ethnicities and Identities

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Hybrids Alike: Understanding Ethnicity and Identity

When I was young, I learnt that part of the essence of green is blue. Without blue, there can be no green. Blue is an inherent aspect of green's existence. This simple, universal fact is easily applicable to the way 'hybrids' like me, identify with being born and raised (and living) in New Zealand, with a Tongan heritage. Like the analogy of creating secondary colours, I believe these two countries are the essence of my ethnic and national identity. Coming up to my twentieth birthday, I have experienced events that follow in this life history that entail concepts hybridity, racism and authenticity. These events in my life have made me understand that there is no perfect delineation between my Tongan and New Zealand identity and that there is a means of seeking balance between these two cultures.

Emily Keddell explains in her article that lived experiences for a hybrid are "important in helping a child attain a healthy regard for themselves and others" (2006, 55). I agree with this statement because in 2001, my lived experience in Tonga helped me to grasp an understanding of being both from Tonga and New Zealand. I spent two months in the house that my maternal grandfather built himself and raised his children in – and I stayed there with my kainga. (Kainga) is a Tongan term used for close and extended relations). The idea of being both Tongan and New Zealander became evident when we classified each other by nationality – those who lived in America as 'The Americans', those from Australia 'The Ozzies', those from New Zealand 'New Zealanders', and those in Tonga 'Tongans'. Interestingly, we were not even called 'Tongans' in Tonga, whereas in New Zealand I had always explained to others that I am Tongan – especially having been the only pupil of Tongan heritage at my (Samoan) preschool of forty to fifty people of Samoan heritage. I was also the only Tongan student in my primary school classes, as well as my high school form class.

The significance of all these nationality based classifications amongst my kainga was that we felt a sense of belonging in two different places – in Tonga, as well as our country of upbringing. Stuart Hall stated that a lived experience would allow hybrids "to see and recognise the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call in retrospect our 'cultural identities' (1990, 237). This means that in seeing where my parents as well as all my ancestors lived, how they lived, and where they all are now, helped me to understand my cultural identity, my hybridity of being a 'Tongan New Zealander'. The reality is that my kainga and I are in sociological terms, hybrids alike. Being able to see that I was not the only hybrid or that I was not the only Tongan student caught in a school full of Samoans – it helped me accept my 'position' as a hybrid. I was no longer the 'odd one out', there were many of us, all making up a fraction of the Tongan Diaspora. It was then that I was able to see my identity of being from two countries, in a brilliant light. This experience has acted as a gateway to understanding my future experiences as a New Zealand-born Tongan. It is important for all people, hybrid or non-hybrid, to understand who they are. I am in a fortunate position, limited in the Tongan language, but able to understand numerous concepts of Tongan culture through living in Tonga for a couple of months.

Growing up, I think I heard just about every racial remark in the playground. I never expected a teacher to have a racist position, nor did I think people would ever be ashamed of aspects of their culture. One day, during 'sharing time', Elizabeth (pseudonym),

blue-eyed, blonde haired six year old, talked about her role at her aunt's wedding. When the teacher found out that my cousin married Elizabeth's aunt, the teacher began to frown and scowl at me. She even 'interrogated' me that day. All her questions alluded to 'Polynesian' stereotypes. I knew that she did not like the idea of a Tongan man marrying an English woman.

At the Christmas barbecue that year, I recall somebody telling me not to tell anyone that there was horse meat in the kitchen because Elizabeth's aunt was there with her family. It is not uncommon for Tongan people to eat horse meat. I actually recall the time when I ate horse meat in secret because my family – all my cousins, aunts, and uncles, and so on, were embarrassed to let their European connections outside see. As a result of this 'indignity', at school I would feel uncomfortable when students mentioned that Tongans ate horse meat. When they learned of this custom, they would cringe, and recite that horses were 'friends', not food – as if I ate it every day.

I felt out of my depth when I heard other stereotypes such as Polynesian people only having one talent, being athletic. Others included our love of dog meat, daily criminal activity and gang affiliations or that we loved a certain music genre. These stereotypes would make me feel self-conscious about some aspects of my Tongan heritage. All these stereotypes were relating to the idea of the ignoble savage – a concept by Michael Shermer which refers to people being stupid and brutal, by nature. (2003, 33) I sensed that this was what my teacher was alluding to, when she learned of my new in-law. Many of my peers would generalise Polynesian people as defiant people.

There are several television shows that depict Tongan stereotypes such as "Johan from Tonga". When people see the main character Jonah, played by a grown English man with brown-painted skin, bullying, swearing at his parents, teachers, and peers, as well as destroying property, getting involved with the police, singing about horses and so on – these ideas become attributed to Tongan people. Jason Kioa argues "This crude caricature is how thousands of Australians will relate to our Tongan young people." (2014, n.p) that these types of shows stimulate the stereotypes about Tongans. When other ethnicities commit crime, eat horse meat or excel in sport, these are not ascribed as traits of their ethnic group. However, these stereotypes are prevalent on Tongans due to the social ascription influenced by the help of the media.

Affirming Kioa's point, school teacher Marc Elrich wrote a powerful piece about his sixth graders in the United States (2015, n.p). His students believe that being defiant, being 'bad', is a black characteristic. The consequence of stereotyping is that people come to accept stereotypes and expect it. As offended as I was of people who labelled Tongans as dog-killers or gang-affiliated, I had assumptions about other ethnic groups, I generalised people such as my 'Asian' friends. Although they were Chinese, Taiwanese, Thai, and Korean, I had categorised that they were all high achievers and did karate all day. Realising that I did not fit the stereotypes of a rugby player, or a gang member, or that I have an eclectic musical palate, I began to see that my 'high achieving Asian' friends were academically successful simply because they worked hard. I saw that others assumed they did karate too. They would get hassled about doing karate, just as I was constantly asked about horsemeat. I have seen that anyone can be stereotyped, and they can stereotype others at the same time. Either way, people are affected by stereotyping. I have learned to position myself as someone who is not ignorant of other cultures and peoples.

Finally, another apparent issue I have perceived is that of authenticity. I have been questioned about my authenticity as a 'Tongan'. A couple of years ago at a wedding, someone asked me what my name was. I answered "Linda". This person sniggered into their wine glass and asked

me why I had a “white” name. Their reply implied that I was ‘fiepalangi’ (term for a person that ‘wants to be British’), which I found deeply insulting. This idea is also explored by Marc Elrich, whose students called them “wannabees: want to be white” (2015, n.p). The students used the term to describe African-Americans – in a hybrid situation like me – who were high-achieving academics. Rather than think of their successes as a result of their hard work, they were classed as ‘trying too hard’ to be white. It is a stereotype that black-skinned people are not intelligent, so for those that do well for themselves, they are thought of as fiepalangi. At the wedding, all I did was answer that person’s question. Yet the person implied that I was trying to be white because my name was not a conventional Tongan name such as ‘Melenaite’, or ‘Meleseini’. As a reply to her remark, my name can be translated into Tongan as ‘Linita’ [say: Lee-knee-dah]. But, my name is Linda. I should not have to ‘prove’ my authenticity as a Tongan, by changing my name.

Similarly, I am often questioned about my faith as well. People often ask me which church I go to, assuming that I am Protestant. When I tell them I am Catholic and attend an English speaking Catholic Church, they compare it to their Tongan-speaking, Tongan hymn-singing, Tongan made church (Siasi Tonga – ‘The Church of Tonga’ which is a Protestant branch established by Tongans).

It is the case that most Tongan people are Christian. However, it is not the case that people are Christian because they are Tongan. Many people, including Tongans themselves, ascribe this idea that if a person is Tongan, they are therefore Protestant – which is invalid. There can be Catholic Tongans like me, gay Tongans, Muslim Tongans, atheist Tongans, half-caste Tongans, Tongans living outside of Tonga, and Tongans with Spanish, English or even Maori names. Therefore, names or religious practices do not define Tongan people’s authenticity.

Authenticity is expressed in one of Thomas King’s texts, stating “I want to look Indian so that you will see me as Indian” (2003, 59). In this context, King desired to appear authentic through his appearance. It is likely that people implied he did not look like an authentic Indian. This is the consequence of social ascriptions – they influence people and make them feel defective, when they are not. This leads to people accepting that authenticity lies in looks, in faith or in names. A Protestant, straight, non-hybrid Tongan can describe some Tongans, but it does not accurately describe all Tongans. Thankfully, due to my lived experience in Tonga, I can disregard what others ascribe to my cultural identity, such as my Spanish originating name.

These events that occurred in my life are examples of some of the challenges and influences of being a hybrid from one ethnic group, but a different nationality. Although I am ‘full’ Tongan, I have had a completely different lifestyle compared to my Tongan cousins in Tonga. After evaluating these occurrences in relation to the concepts of hybridity, racism and authenticity, I have learnt how to deal with social ascriptions such as stereotypes about Tongans and other ethnic cultures. I have also learnt not to self-ascribe those stereotypes because they cannot ‘measure’ my Tongan, or even my New Zealand authenticity. I am lucky to have grown up with experiences in Tonga. I say this because I have young relatives who were not born in Tonga, and have no knowledge of the Tongan language or many aspects of Tongan culture. They have mentioned that they are the only brown-skinned students among mostly European students – just as I was the only Tongan in a Samoan school. They might question their authenticity as Tongans, or be questioned as I was because of their lack of Tongan culture. Optimistically, they might one day feel a strong sense of belonging to Tonga, as I do, from my lived experience there. Even my Tongan language is limited, thus I study the Tongan language at university. Although I have not been to Tonga in the past five years, I know that this does

mean my 'level' of authenticity could diminish. Like the colour green, it comes in dozens of shades, but the essential properties are always yellow and blue. Rosa Sheets accurately summarise hybridity by observing the situation well in saying that "The individual takes the world in by observing and noting differences" (1999, 75). In this way, I can practice both cultures, rather than separate them. I realise that I am not an equal mixture of yellow and blue, but a different shade of green that captures both my Tongan heritage and my New Zealand life.

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