For the overseas Tongan, what does “being Tongan” mean?

Is knowing the Tongan language that important?

Should Tongan parents here in the United States raise their children like they do in the Islands?

How does Tongan culture adapt to American society?

These are some of the hundreds of questions that have been asked on the Kava Bowl (KB), an Internet discussion forum with predominantly overseas Tongan participants. They are also the kinds of questions I had in mind when I began my research with Tongan migrants early in 1995. Having studied childhood in Tonga, in the South Pacific, particularly the processes through which children become “Tongan” (Morton 1996), I became interested in the impact of migration on Tongans’ ideas about what it means to be Tongan. How do they negotiate cultural differences? Do they maintain, reject, or adjust their ideas about being Tongan once they are living overseas?

By following the KB discussions, interviewing some of the regular participants via e-mail, and conducting more conventional ethnographic fieldwork with Tongans in Melbourne, Australia, I was able to explore the diverse experiences of migrants and their descendants. This book is the result of those explorations, and its central theme is cultural identity in the context of migration, an issue that has been raised on numerous occasions on the KB and that is of deep concern to Tongans both at home and overseas.

Many Tongans assert that to be “really” Tongan a person must have not only Tongan ancestors, but also a knowledge of *anga fakatonga*, or the Tongan way. This concept encompasses all values, beliefs, and practices that are regarded as elements of Tongan “culture” and “tradition.” As such a broadly defined concept it leaves a great deal of room for in-
interpretation, and each person I have encountered has given a slightly different definition of *anga fakatonga* and of its many elements. Both in Tonga and in the diaspora it is also a highly contested concept, particularly across generations, and is constantly under negotiation and reconstruction. There is widespread concern that *anga fakatonga* is being lost and that the younger generations, especially those growing up overseas, will therefore lose their cultural identity. Will young Tongans overseas be “Tongan” only by virtue of their genetic inheritance, or will they continue to identify culturally as Tongan? If they do the latter, which elements of being Tongan will they consider important?

Cultural Identity and Ethnicity

My very first interview in Melbourne reminded me that “cultural identity” is as slippery a concept as “the Tongan way” and also one that cannot be assumed to be of equal significance to each individual. My first interviewee was ‘Ana (thirty-eight), who left Tonga for New Zealand at the age of eighteen (see Case Study 1). She then moved to Melbourne in the late 1970s, where she married another Tongan. At the time of our interview in April 1995, she was living in a modest suburban home with her husband, her two teenage children, and two adult nieces. She worked and studied part-time and was involved in a Tongan church. ‘Ana was emphatic that she did not see herself primarily as Tongan; her Tongan identity was something she preferred to leave largely unexamined, taken for granted, and to be shrugged off impatiently if it got in the way of what she wanted to do in life. Yet no matter how much she was uninterested in her cultural identity, it shaped her life. It caused friction with her husband, who was self-consciously aware and proud of his own Tongan identity, and it influenced her relationship with her children, who had varying degrees of involvement with their extended family and with the members of the Tongan church they attended. Furthermore, ‘Ana’s identity as a member of an “ethnic” group often simply could not be discounted in her interactions with the non-Tongan population.

This first interview helped to shape the research that followed, warning me not to make assumptions about how people construct their identities and alerting me to the diversity of experiences both within and between families of migrants and their descendants. It revealed the importance of people’s agency and decision making, and their active involvement in shaping their own lives and attempting to
shape the lives of others. At the same time, the interview highlighted the kinds of structural limitations, such as socioeconomic status and the impact of ethnic stereotypes, that can impinge upon this agency. Ana, like many others I spoke with, also pointed out the constraints imposed from “within” by the Tongan way itself, especially on younger people.

Throughout this book the younger generations are a central concern: the children, adolescents, and young adults who have spent most or all of their lives outside Tonga. Already the overseas-born Tongans outnumber those born in Tonga, and my survey of 100 households in Melbourne showed that of 430 individuals of Tongan descent, 204 were born in Tonga and 226 were born overseas. Throughout the Tongan population worldwide there is a high proportion of young people; for example, in New Zealand just over 32 percent of Tongans were under the age of 10 in 1996 (Statistics New Zealand 1998, 11), and in Tonga itself the median age was 19.9 in the same year, with 50.2 percent of the population under 19 (Tonga Chronicle 1998d).

However, the published information on this critical group is meager. By focusing largely on these younger Tongans, including those from marriages between Tongans and non-Tongans, my aim is to contribute to our knowledge of their experiences, attitudes, and identities, as well as to provide a glimpse into the possible future of Tongans overseas. Of course, not all of those who were born overseas or who migrated as young children are “young,” as some are now in their thirties and even forties. This group has not been excluded from this book, and it is interesting to compare their experiences with those of younger people. I have included them in the cohort I refer to as “the younger generations,” but by far the largest group within this cohort is under the age of twenty.

My concern with cultural and ethnic identity is with the ways they are subjectively defined, described, and experienced by individuals and how people measure their own and others’ identities against an imagined norm of Tonganness. Any attempt to list and measure the criteria that define Tongan identity would be futile, as each individual has her or his own definition of that identity, shaped by her or his life experiences. In later chapters it will become clear that certain elements are more widely regarded as essentially Tongan than others and that even these elements are contested and subject to transformation.

The view of cultural and ethnic identity taken here is influenced by recent work on the socially constructed nature of identity, sometimes
referred to as the constructivist approach. Joanne Nagel states that in relation to ethnic identity, this approach

stresses the fluid, situational, volitional, and dynamic character of ethnic identification, organization, and action—a model that emphasizes the socially “constructed” aspects of ethnicity, i.e., the ways in which ethnic boundaries, identities, and cultures, are negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction inside and outside ethnic communities (1994, 152).6

While this view accords to a great extent with my own, a concern is that, as Gillian Bottomley argues, a “voluntarist position” neglects the fact that ethnicity can be “imposed, as well as assumed and inherited” (1992, 60). Nor is ethnicity something that can be adopted and discarded at will, particularly when there are physical markers of ethnicity and when it is linked to notions of “race” and to class structures. The argument that ethnicity is socially constructed needs to be tempered by an awareness of the specific historical and social contexts in which it is embedded and the subsequent limitations on its malleability and fluidity (Fenton 1999; Jenkins 1997). It is also important to recognize, as Arjun Appadurai points out, that ethnicity becomes “naturalized” (1996, 140) so that while it can be analyzed as a social construction, it is often experienced quite differently. While the primordialist view of ethnicity has been thoroughly critiqued (e.g., Eller and Coughlan 1993; Tilley 1997), it will become clear in this book that many Tongans perceive their cultural identities in terms of primordial attachments based on “blood” ties and inherited qualities of “Tonganness.”

This “naturalized” view of ethnicity involves assumptions of authority and authenticity; the belief that there is one particular way to be “Tongan.” Yet for Tongans, as for any immigrant group, in practice there is no unified or homogenous cultural identity (Gans 1997). Cultural identity, as Stuart Hall argues, is something that is constantly being produced and reproduced, with similarity and continuity coexisting with difference and rupture (1990). Herbert Gans points out: “Every immigrant family comes with its own ethnic practices, which are most likely a mix of handed-down remembered family, community and regional practices” (1997, 881). Ensuring migrants’ descendants retain a sense of ethnic identity may require the reconstruction and “invention” of ethnic identity, a process Gans points out can be similar to what has been described as “acculturation” elsewhere in the literature.7
Thus the reconstruction of ethnic identity, or “tradition,” may also be part of the process of adjusting to the host society. As well as retaining the loyalty of younger generations within the group, these processes of reconstruction also occur in response to the imposition of ethnicity onto the group by the host society. In a paper written during the early stages of my research, I argued that the term “cultural identity” is preferable to “ethnic identity” since it allows for more flexible, hybrid identities that extend beyond the imagined boundaries of “ethnic” groups (Morton 1998a, 4). Cultural identity encompasses the nonethnic, intragroup distinctions Tongans use, such as those between bush and town people, different religious denominations, and so forth. Rather than attempting to conflate culture and ethnicity, the term “cultural identity” as I use it refers to Tongans’ own understandings of what it is to be Tongan and how they evaluate one another according to those understandings.

During my research it became clear that overseas Tongans are also adopting an ethnic identity, which is gradually blurring with what I have called cultural identity. In the host nations, this occurs as a response to the ideology and practices of “multiculturalism,” in which ethnicity is represented in the public sphere primarily by the outward markers of cultural difference, such as food, music and dance, clothing, and so on. By accepting and working with these representations in their interactions with the wider community, “ethnic” groups can access specially allocated services and resources, and through this, groups can gain a measure of power (see Finney 1999 on Tongans in Canberra). At the same time, this construction of ethnicity can begin to influence people’s ideas about “cultural” identity so that over time it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish between ethnic and cultural identity.

This blurring of ethnic and cultural identity is occurring throughout the overseas-Tongan population, and increasingly it is a response to Tongans’ sense of themselves as marginalized and disempowered. “Ethnicity” may be publically constructed in terms of cultural difference, but the power relations underlying this concept (and that of “race”) disadvantage nonwhite minority groups (Hage 1998; Tai and Kenyatta 1999). By accepting their positioning as an ethnic group, Tongans are asserting their difference while proclaiming their unity as a people, as well as heralding their intentions to seek ways to improve their situation. It is ironic indeed that while Tongans are intensely
proud that Tonga was never formally colonized, as immigrants they have often been subjected to the “internal colonialism” faced by minority groups in Western nations (Pedraza 1994, 4). Tongans’ increasing awareness of “postcolonial” issues is emerging not out of independence struggles within their own nation, but through the process of migration.

Tongan Migration
The migration of Tongans to host nations around the world, particularly since the late 1960s, has created a diasporic population that is now at least equal to that remaining in Tonga (see chap. 2). They are “diasporic” in the sense of being “multiple communities of a dispersed population” (Clifford 1994, 304; see Tedlock 1996), and while they are not exiled in the manner of the original diasporic peoples, such as Jews, we will see that even those who desire an eventual return to Tonga are unable to do so. Compared with many diasporic populations, such as the Chinese (Ong 1999), Sikhs (Barrier and Dusenbury 1989; Singh and Barrier 1996), and the “black” diaspora (Conniff 1994; Segal 1995), the overseas Tongan population is small, making them a largely invisible population in host nations such as the United States and Australia. However, they share the tendency of many diasporic and migrant populations to be positioned as part of a larger, panethnic category by the receiving nations: Tongans become “Pacific Islanders” while others are “Asians” or “Hispanics.” In chapter 7 the growing tendency of young overseas Tongans to adopt a panethnic identity is examined, revealing that such imposed categories can also become internalized in the process of constructing cultural identities.

For all their new and diverse experiences as settlers in their new homes, very few Tongan migrants ever completely lose their connections—emotional, familial, economic, religious, and otherwise—to their homeland; they remain between two shores. Their children and grandchildren often have a much narrower range of such ties, although for a great many of them Tonga is still a significant symbol of their “heritage,” their “roots,” as well as being an often romanticized vision of another way of life. Those who retain multiple ties with Tonga can be described as “transnational,” maintaining a sense of Tonga as “home” while establishing new homes elsewhere (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Kearney 1995; Mahler 1998). Their important economic contribution to Tonga, through remittances, is discussed in chap-
Chapter 2; however, throughout this book it will become apparent that it is emotional and social ties that are of more concern to Tongans and that can indirectly affect even those young Tongans who have no direct connections with the islands.

Recent work on transnationalism has begun to consider the “second generation” and the extent to which ties are maintained with their parents’ homeland and with members of the diasporic population (Vertocev 2001). The literature on transnationalism has also expanded from a primary focus on the global economy (see Kearney 1995; Sassen 1998) to a concern with issues of identity (e.g., see Hannerz 1996; Vertocev 2001; Westwood and Phizacklea 2000). My exploration of the construction of cultural identity by second-generation Tongans is informed by this work, and I examine the impact of new forms of transnational ties, such as those facilitated by computer-mediated communications.

Although many Tongans young and old have a sentimental view of themselves as “between two shores,” the reality is that the dispersal of Tongans throughout much of the world also has led to the creation of a multitude of other ties—between family and friends in different locations overseas, within the Tongan populations concentrated in particular cities and towns, and between Tongans and others of many different nationalities. Tongans form an astonishingly complex network of connections despite the fact that large-scale international migration is a relatively recent phenomenon for them, beginning only in the 1970s.

The earliest of these connections were made long before the 1970s, although until the mid-twentieth century most Tongans traveling overseas were temporary visitors rather than migrants. One of the earliest, and certainly most well known, of these visitors was Tonga’s first king, Tupou I (King George), who traveled to Sydney in 1853. His trip long has been regarded as significantly influencing his determination to keep Tonga’s lands out of foreign hands. Soon after that, members of Tonga’s royal and chiefly families were sent to schools in Auckland and Sydney, or they traveled there for medical treatments, holidays, and official visits. Commoners (nonchiefly Tongans) also had early opportunities to travel on whaling ships and other vessels and as missionaries to other parts of the Pacific. The influx of American soldiers into Tonga during World War II gave many Tongans their first experiences of wage labor and contributed to the trickle of immigration in the 1950s, which grew into a surge by the 1970s as increasing numbers
sought educational and other opportunities overseas. Some later returned to their island home, but many remained overseas and became the first wave of settlers, later bringing family members to join them and so beginning to weave the web of connections that continues to grow today.

Other Pacific Islanders experienced very different historical ties to foreign nations, particularly throughout the period of European and American colonial expansion, but they have shared the Tongans’ history of dispersing through migration and of maintaining complex ties with one another and with their homelands. This history has led John Connell to comment that “it is the new diaspora that extraordinarily rapidly has come to characterize the contemporary South Pacific” (1987, 399; see McCall and Connell 1993). Pacific Islanders have migrated in numbers that are large relative to their total populations, yet their actual numbers are so small that they have attracted comparatively little attention in studies of migration and settlement. In his recent study of Islanders’ remittance behavior Richard Brown observed, “It is surprising how relatively little is known about the Pacific Island migrant communities in Australia and elsewhere” (1998, 112).

This book focuses on one of the largest of the Pacific Islander populations overseas, the Tongans, particularly those in the major receiving nations of the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. My discussion of cultural identity is contextualized within a broader examination of diasporic Tongans, looking at the ways they engage with the wider societies in which they live, particularly in terms of their negotiations of cultural difference. Tongans throughout the diaspora combine Tongan and other elements in their daily lives in a vast variety of ways, and my aim is to explore the impact of these multiple, sometimes conflicting, elements on individuals’ perceptions of their own and other Tongans’ identities.

**Tongans in Cyberspace**

The KB forum and similar sites provide overseas Tongans with a means of communicating with others like themselves throughout the world and a chance to discuss issues and air their opinions in a context that, because of its computer-mediated character, seems safe and somewhat impersonal. As I have shown elsewhere (Morton 1999), an incredibly diverse range of issues are discussed, many of which center on the con-
cerns of migrants and their descendants. When I first came across the KB I was astonished at how openly critical were many of the posts, particularly those by young Tongans, who in “real life” ideally should be respectful, obedient, and never critical of their elders or the Tongan way. To some extent this can be attributed to the anonymity afforded by Internet communications, but many posters choose to give their own names (Morton 2001b), and their messages on the KB represent an increasingly self-conscious evaluation of the Tongan way that is occurring among Tongans more generally and that is having diverse effects on both older and younger generations.

The KB is part of a larger site called Tonga Online (http://www.tongaonline.com/), established in 1995 by Taholo Kami, a Tongan and at that time a student at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. The site was developed partly for non-Tongans who wanted to know more about Tonga and its people, but the primary impetus for the site was to provide a means for Tongans in the diaspora to communicate easily with one another. Tonga Online comprises numerous different elements, from virtual postcards to travel information, as well as articles and features, news from Tonga, and so on, but the most popular is the KB forum. In his mission statement for the KB, Kami stated that it aimed “[t]o provide a bridge for our island communities. Bringing people together around the KAVABOWL to discuss issues that will make a difference in the urban communities overseas and the Islands back home” (4.2.98). The KB quickly became incredibly popular and was receiving over half a million “hits” per month by 1998. Originally a single discussion forum, this popularity led it to be subdivided into different forums for greetings and announcements, general discussion, poetry and creative writing, and so on. The “chat rooms” linked to the KB are also popular and unlike the main forum involve synchronous communication.

Promoted as a virtual kava-drinking circle in a virtual village, the KB became a means for Tongans around the world to communicate. Varying from short greetings to long discussions of different issues, the messages posted serve to connect friends and families, disseminate information, and facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas. Many of the participants are located in major cities and are young and well educated (many are attending tertiary institutions or have already graduated). However, the location, age, education, and even English fluency of participants varies enormously. Their discussions have been
Chapter 1

a rich source of data for this book, and after following the forum for some time I was also able to contact regular participants directly and “interview” them via e-mail.\textsuperscript{15}

**Tongans in Melbourne**

The Tongans of Melbourne are a small migrant population in the multicultural capital of the state of Victoria, with inhabitants originating in over two hundred countries. In some suburbs of Melbourne over half the population was born overseas, and while some migrant groups have congregated in particular areas, Tongans are dispersed throughout the metropolitan area with very little clustering. Appendix A discusses this population in detail, including the history of Tongan settlement in Melbourne and the results of my survey of 100 households comprising 479 individuals.\textsuperscript{16} At this juncture, my aim is simply to give a brief overview of the population of Tongans in Melbourne by way of introduction. Interviews and informal conversations with members of this population combine with the KB material and e-mail interviews discussed previously to give voice to the views and experiences of Tongan migrants and their children.

I estimate that there are around three thousand people of Tongan descent living in Melbourne in the year 2001, many of whom can trace their migration back through chains linking them to a handful of early migrants arriving in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Most of these first migrants were young women who went to Melbourne for training, often in nursing, and who married Australians and settled permanently. Over the years they assisted family members’ migration, and these new migrants then helped still more relatives, forming the chains that continue even today, as most new migrants arrive under family reunification schemes.\textsuperscript{17} Figure 1 shows the chains of migration within one extended family in Melbourne, from the 1960s to the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18} In total, there are now 138 members of this one family living in Australia, all of whom can trace their connections through blood or marriage back to the one original migrant who came to study, married an Australian, and eventually became an Australian citizen. Many other relatives are scattered throughout the diaspora, while some remain in Tonga.

By the late 1960s the Tongans in Melbourne had begun to develop a sense of community through social gatherings, and in 1969 they established the interdenominational Tongan Christian Fellowship. The
Figure 1: Chain migration within one extended family in Melbourne, 1960–1980.

group expanded and was soon having regular church services, forming
dance and choir groups, sharing events such as marriages, funerals,
and baptisms, and helping new migrants find accommodation and em-
ployment. Over time there were schisms in the group, with some
members splitting off to form new church-based groups in different
parts of Melbourne. By 2001 there were twenty-two congregations with
predominantly Tongan membership in Melbourne and rural Victoria,
representing twelve different religious groups.

As the number of Tongans in Melbourne has grown and the various
churches have been established, the sense of a united “Tongan com-
unity” has, to a great extent, diminished. The sheer number of Ton-
gans in Melbourne today means that they do not all know one an-
other, as was the case in the 1960s through to the early 1980s,
although Tongans who meet can usually discover some connection
through ties of extended kinship. A residual sense of community does
persist, encouraged in part by outsiders’ perceptions of Tongans as an
“ethnic group.”
The Tongan-born living in Melbourne are predominantly from Tonga’s capital, Nuku'alofa. They are now outnumbered by their overseas-born children, and overall it is a youthful population, with nearly 70 percent of my sample population under age thirty. Some of the children of migrants have now had children of their own, beginning the third generation of Tongans in Melbourne, and there was one child in my sample, an infant, who is of the fourth generation. Intermarriage has been common since the first wave of students arrived and married in Australia, so that many young people have one parent who is not Tongan (20.7 percent of my sample). Young people with two Tongan parents or one are differentiated throughout the book as “Tongan” and “part-Tongan” respectively, with the latter also occasionally referred to by hyphenated terms indicating their parents’ nationalities.

Scattered across Melbourne, people’s homes vary from tiny “bedsits” (one-room apartments) to large, expensive houses. In these homes there is great variation in the extent to which Tongan elements are present. The interiors of some homes are much like those in Tonga, with pandanus mats fringed with colorful wool on the floor, handicrafts such as fans and bags on display, many framed family photographs covering the walls, and religious paintings or wall hangings. There are smells of Tongan food cooking, and within the home people wear Tongan clothing and listen to Tongan music. Other homes betray little or no Tongan influence, and household members appear thoroughly Western, preferring Western food, clothing, music, and social activities.

In terms of settlement history and socioeconomic status, the Tongan population of Melbourne can be roughly divided into two groups. The first includes the early migrants and their families and the relatives they have sponsored to join them. Many could be described as “middle class” and are employed in skilled occupations. Members of this group tend to be more geographically scattered and are more likely to own their own homes. Many mix comfortably with non-Tongans in work and social situations, especially those who have intermarried, and their homes and lifestyles are more likely to be Western influenced.

The second group is comprised of more recent migrants, who tend to live in closer proximity to each other and have fewer interactions with non-Tongans. This group is more “working class,” with a high proportion of unskilled workers and lower levels of education. They are more likely to have Tongan lifestyles and home decor. Of course, these are not clear-cut categories, and there is considerable variation within
each of the groups, but this distinction between them was often mentioned by Tongans themselves and is at the root of some of the tensions within the Melbourne population that will be discussed in chapter 3.

It does not follow that members of the latter group identify more strongly as Tongan than the former, and for every person I spoke with, in Melbourne and elsewhere, the issue of cultural identity was important in some way. Even ’Ana, who does not dwell on her own identity as Tongan, finds her life influenced in many ways by that identity. We will see that ’Ana is quite unusual in her lack of interest in her cultural identity and that it is far more common for this to be of considerable concern to people. As indicated by the sample of questions raised on the KB found at the beginning of this chapter, migration influences people to become more self-consciously aware of their identities. Migration entails an ongoing negotiation of cultural differences in workplaces, schools, and homes; it is a process that can entail tensions and conflict but that can also be rewarding and enriching for both migrants and their descendants.