



Commentary

***Koe lālānga 'eku mo'ui* – A personal narrative on Tongan perspectives of wellbeing**

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In Tonga, our language is the essence of our culture and identity, and as a Tongan born educator, I see it as very important to teach Tongan children about the cultural value of being Tongan supporting their wellbeing. Although my two children, Falenilupe and 'Elimeleki, were born here in New Zealand, I believe the foundation of culture, language and values from a Tongan perspective is what contributes to the richness of their wellbeing. It is the weaving of family, respect, language, church, and education that forms my wellbeing. What follows is my personal narrative of selected childhood experiences to illustrate how wellbeing for Tongan children is shaped in daily life.

Growing up in the tropical island of Tonga created the best memories I have. In my childhood, three aspects were important for my wellbeing: family and respect (*famili moe faka'apa'apa*), church (*siasi*) and education (*ako*). The home, where one's family belongs, is where early childhood education begins in Tonga (Teisina & Pau'uvale, 2011, as cited in Grey & Clark, 2013).

In a family or home, *faka'apa'apa* (respect), a value that is highly viewed as a Tongan *koloa* (treasure), is taught and passed on to children by their parents as part of their wellbeing and *ulungaanga fakaTonga* (Tongan way of life). Although respect is not the only aspect of wellbeing that is taught in Tongan homes, it is a fundamental value of a Tongan way of life. My mother, Siokapesi, used to teach me about respect and why being respectful is what a Tongan child should strive for. People in Tonga have different ways and views about how respect should be incorporated into the wellbeing of their children, which is good as it caters to different views on the role respect plays in terms of personal wellbeing, which most likely is not the same for everyone. In Tongan families, fathers are highly respected, although there is respect all around the family setting, the community and the village. By saying that, the role of parents is so important because the foundation of *ilo* (knowledge) and *poto* (wisdom) starts at home and within the family.

To me, respect is about knowing what to do, what to say and who I am talking to. It is related to the formation of identity and cultural belonging. Not only do children have to respect their parents, but there also has to be respect between brothers and sisters. In my upbringing, girls were regarded as superior to their brothers in terms of family roles. In Tonga, being a girl or the oldest girl in a family often means you are the one responsible for looking after your siblings and your parents, taking care of daily chores and making sure that you listen to and obey your parents. However, respect between siblings in both directions is necessary. One of the customary practices of respect occurs during the festive season of Christmas and New Year. In Tonga on Christmas Eve, the brother(s) take food, money or something else suitable as a gift and give it to their sister(s), or, more specifically, the older sister. And, on New Year's Eve, the sister(s) will



take *tapa* (a traditional mat) as a gift to their brother. This idea of caring and giving resonates with respect in Tongan culture and it verifies togetherness and the importance of the expected cultural roles between brothers and sisters. This custom is practiced from a very young age on and it is still customary today.

Returning to wellbeing for Tongan children, other aspects come into play: Saturday, for example, is a day where most families prepare together everything they will need for Sunday, which is still treated as a sacred day in Tonga. People go into town to do their shopping, to the market where people sell their fresh local produce, or to the waterfront for fresh seafood. For me as a child, it was always a fun experience to go into town, because we would not only buy things for the family but there were always treats and quality time spent with our parents. Accompanying parents and helping to prepare for Sunday is one way that children contribute to the family's needs and take on responsibilities, but at the same time learn.

In my childhood, many people also went to their plantations on Saturday. People tend to grow their own food crops and supplies of vegetables in Tonga. Food is also often harvested and shared among the village and homes. I remember that sometimes we shared family time by going to the bush where everyone worked together to create a fun time for the family. The men were in charge of preparing the *umu* (earth oven) to cook the meal for the day; the women were the ones who prepared the *lu* (taro leaves parcel with meat, coconut milk, and onions) for cooking. These examples reflect the idea of helping, knowing your roles and working together as a family. People do not have to buy yams, taro or cassava; it is grown at family plantations and shared with each other. As children, we enjoyed ripe fresh mangoes, guavas and edible berries that grew at our plantation. Before the day's end, carriages or any vehicles used to go to the bush would be loaded with all the things that families needed to have for their Sunday meal in preparation to uphold the sacredness of the Sunday in Tonga.

Another example of a typical experience for Tongan children is a family trip to the beach. A good amount of time is spent to prepare and get all things ready for the beach. There will be cooking, fishing, seafood collecting, hunting, and exploring, and games will be played, but most of all, the beach and the sea is where children learn how to have fun and swim. The beach is also a place of relaxation and where people catch up with all the town/village stories. I remember that I used to sit at the beach and look at some of the little islands in the far distances, and my father would tell me stories about these islands, which still fascinate me today. These are examples of how family and community are constantly present and important in a child's upbringing and development of wellbeing. Other activities beyond the family that are often part of Tongan children's experiences are games and sports such as netball, rugby or tennis.

The church is also a big part of a child's wellbeing because children in Tonga are mostly brought up with the value of the church and Christian faith, although different in denominations. Going to church on Sunday was a given, and Sunday school starts from preschool age to whenever a child chooses to stop attending. Children are taught about stories from the Bible, learn Bible verses and sing church hymns. White Sunday is a Sunday that most children look forward to every year. That is the first Sunday of May, where all the children of the church memorise their Bible verses and stories and read them at church. For myself, to learn how to read aloud in Tongan is a form of respect and a sign of strong



values. I am sure that Tongan children who grew up in New Zealand may say otherwise, but on the island, White Sunday was a very special day. Children also got to wear new clothes and have a special feast and special treatment. When I was a child, my mother would sew me my own dresses, and we went into town to get my shoes and all the things I would need for White Sunday. As I grew older, I more and more appreciated all the things that my mother had done for my sister and me. Today, being a mother myself, I am finding myself repeating most things that I have seen my mother do and repeating the same with my daughter. Church in Tonga does not only teach children about God and the Bible, it also plays a part in teaching the culture and values, and how to work alongside other families in the village. It emphasises again the importance of cultural and community belonging in Tongan culture.

Education is also part of children's wellbeing. Although I was educated at home and in a church setting, I also attended the only kindergarten in my village *Tatakamotonga*, the ancient capital of Tonga. At the kindergarten, children got to play different games, not only traditional ones like *tafue* (jump rope), *langatoi* (hide and seek), *mapu* (marbles), and *pani* (tag) but also board games, puzzles, jigsaws, cards, and many more. Children are also taught to sing songs, both in English and Tongan, and listen to fairy tales and Tongan stories. At kindergarten and school, children continue to learn more about the Tongan culture and who we are as Tongans.

As part of our cultural upbringing and wellbeing, we practice the traditional Tongan dance, which is a big part of our culture. Children are taught about the value of dancing, the movements and the meaning of every performance and the words of the songs. Sometimes we performed for our parents and people from the village to display our learning experiences. On such occasions, parents prepared food and shared a meal with everyone, as food is a huge part of the Tongan culture. Food is also one way of sharing our culture with others, especially visitors to the island kingdom.

Sometimes teachers at the kindergarten took us on walks to historical places nearby or excursions to the King's villa in our village where we got to listen to stories about the Kings and the monarchy, but also myths and legends from the village or the Kingdom. This experience always inspired me because of the oral tradition of Tonga and how knowledge is passed on through generations of orators. I really enjoyed old stories and finding out new things about my village and the Island.

To sum up, as stated at the beginning, it is the weaving of family and respect, language, church, and education that forms the basis of my wellbeing as a Tongan. Although our children born and raised in New Zealand or elsewhere grow up under different circumstances, I believe it is important that we uphold our culture and our values and help them understand how their belonging to Tongan communities supports their happiness and wellbeing.

Tu'a'ofa 'eiki atu (Thank you)



References

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