

Tonga as a nation is in that stage that corresponds to adolescence in humans

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Marriage is one of the few things a Tongan girl looks forward to in life

Tonga, like many other countries of the world is in that stage of nationhood that can be directly, corresponded to what is called adolescence in humans. It is in that terrible mid-way position which is simultaneous death and birth-- death of childhood and birth of adulthood -- and full of all the pains of both. What is merely sympathy provoking to watch occurring in rising young boys and girls becomes nearly heartbreaking to see taking place in a nation, but no less natural. It is the only seep you can take (be you a nation or a person) after childhood. It is by no means a graceful time of life and rarely a stable time, but it is nearly always a comical time, rather pitifully comical -- the way it is funny to see a clown trip and fall over his own feet.

Tonga, as an adolescent country, is comically awkward physically and heartistically. It's a beautiful nation in that disgruntled, carefree, adolescent sort of way. The people and the land itself seem young even though they are an old race and Tonga is an old island. It is full of sensitivity and yet callousness, humility and yet stubborn pride, unity in thought and yet separateness in heart. And it is at times, in the midst of all these paradoxes, infuriating.

Like the age of adolescence, the people of Tonga are at a time of movement, an unstable time that is manifested in every aspect of life, especially the aspects of heart. They are being influenced deeply by the West's romance magazines, R-rated movies, western standards of marriage and the general torrent of changes that occur in one's heart while growing up.

One good example is the rather sad story of a young man who was caught in the crosscurrents of two cultures: In Tonga we have a monarchy system which consists of the king and his entourage at the top, chiefs, then nobles and then commoners (with varying degrees of all of them except the king). The leaders of the nation still match the young people of marrying age who are of noble or royal blood to make sure of the best diplomatic and family relations within Tonga. The young man of the story, my friend Siale, has the misfortune to be eldest son of one of the seven chiefs. This means that when his father dies Siale will inherit the title, the land and the responsibilities of a high noble. It was the hope of the people of Siale's villages that he marry the royal princess.

Siale also has the misfortune to be breathtakingly handsome and that, coupled with his title, makes him very desirable husband material and the object of daydreams for many noble young ladies. And even, rumor said, for her royal highness.

To secure him the most advantageous future Siale was taken very good care of. That is, he was sent to Australia at the age of thirteen to study and, as he grew older, allowed enough freedom to sow his wild oats, of which he had many. But he always knew, without being told, that he was public property, that Tonga owned him.

But a strange thing happened to him during the seven years that he was there. A strange thing that happens to noble and commoner alike when they go to Australia. He learned western culture, western standards, western likes and dislikes. And he became aware that the chains that bound his heart and mind to Tonga were not the chains of love but of other people's selfishness. He broke many hearts, I'm sure, owing to his striking appearance and restless, moody personality. Once he threatened to get married, much to everyone's despair. They brought him back with a jerk and pacified him by telling him that after a year of trial separation he could go back and marry her. But Siale knew that they were just waiting for the king to decide who would marry his daughter.

When Siale left at the age of thirteen he hadn't given much thought to marriage. Consequently he hadn't spent much time with girls or with the thoughts of them. But his father's villages were thinking about these things for him, and plenty. They pondered even then who the lucky girl would be. When Siale came back he was strong and proud and bitter, resenting deeply the lack of freedom and privacy.



The children are shy, naughty and comical, but most of all charming

There are only two men whose families are high enough socially to marry into the king's family! Those two are Siale and Tu'ita, and the choosing of this fated young man is a public affair. The king finally chooses, of course, who the groom will be but until that time the whole country is free to speculate and gossip as wildly as they please. And they are always infinitely pleased to gossip about the princess. So when somehow word slipped out that both Siale and Tu'ita had proposed to the princess within a week of each other the rumors spread like thick smoke through the villages.

Siale didn't want to marry the princess. It is true that she is very beautiful, herself, and the top of Tonga's narrow social ladder, but Siale had only proposed to her because it was right for him to do so. It was his duty. He became gloomy about the whole prospect and future of his life. He sank into an internal rebellion which seemed to make him even more mysterious and alluring to all the young daughters of the Tongan elite.

Siale's father didn't worry about the state of his son and it's doubtful that he cared a great deal. He's 79 years old and happily narrow-minded. He enjoys, with unembarrassed relish, the benefits of his title. Twice he has flown to Hawaii for eye operations.

It was on the second trip that Siale went with him. Siale felt that his new freedom in such a place deserved celebration, as everyone expected he would. And celebrate he did. He drove around in his cousin's sports car and took girls to nightclubs. He also felt the desire to never have those old chains put back on him. One of the girls he took to nightclubs was a Tongan from a wealthy (but not noble) family. She was famed for her beauty and had left many young men waiting for her in Tonga while she went to school in Hawaii. One day she and Siale got married. They didn't tell anyone, or invite anyone, or care, momentarily, what anyone said. He went back to Tonga and his new wife stayed to finish her education. He had been gone a full two months.

When he returned the rumors had already been flying like sea birds after a fish. When Siale left Tonga the king had still been undecided as to who would be the groom of his lovely daughter and when the choice was suddenly taken out of his hands he became furious. But Siale had more than the king's fury to worry about. His father was furious for he had hoped to lift his family one more step up that crowded ladder. The president of Siale's church was furious for he had hoped to have some royalty back in the Free Church of Tonga instead of the Wesleyans having all the blue blood. His father's villagers were furious for they had naturally wanted some say in the matter, and the princess was furious for she had hoped to have the more handsome of her two suitors as her husband. Not to mention perhaps a dozen or so young noble girls and their fathers who had all had their eyes on Siale. Virtually all of Tonga is angry with our poor hero.

On the Sunday after his return from Hawaii I spoke to him about it. He spoke quietly as if to avoid invoking any more anger upon himself, but honestly for he has come to know me as a person who is quite uninvolved yet concerned.

"Did you marry her because you were angry, Siale?" I asked.

"Maybe" was his sullen reply. The family of the bride is delighted, if no one else is, because their daughter has married a chief's son. That's quite a catch. This raises their rank up and, though it may be a strain on the purse strings a bit because of all the presents they'll have to come up with and all the pigs

they'll have to kill, it adds a noticeable amount of prestige to the family tree.

"Do you love her?" I asked him.

"I don't think so." He looked rather sheepish.

"But she is beautiful." I tried to console his obvious unhappiness.

"Yes, she is beautiful," he said and he was pouting just slightly.



Some of my students playing marbles after school

Physical Tonga:

Tongatapu is the central island group of the three in Tonga. It is flat and tropical and just the way you imagine a South Pacific paradise to be... almost. Take the ride from my house to town, for instance. There is a good cross-section of Tongan life. For one thing, I live on one side of the island and the central part of the town is on the other side and I can get there in fifteen minutes by bike. The ride is very pleasant on a clear day. But any clear day can pour rain, and often does, out of the clear blue sky. Literally. This can be a bit unsettling, as you can well imagine. I leave my house which is directly on the lagoon. My bicycle is waiting faithfully outside, painted white to discourage thefts. I rattle past my forlorn vegetable garden which looks much more like a rice paddy this time of year. Some Tongan vegetables still survive and stick up happily content in their natural habitat: six inches of muddy water. Where last season a healthy tangle of cucumber vines lay now lays the muddy remains of two weeks of solid rain, night and day.

On the road I pass little houses, of all shapes and built out of every material you can think of. Little wooden matchboxes on cement legs, houses built of corrugated sheet metal which is usually used for roofs and water tanks but sometimes finds its way to the walls. (These become suffocating hot in the summer months and I find it amazing that they tolerate it.) Many traditional Tongan houses are made of woven coconut fronds. These are by far the most practical of the ones the Tongans build, most suited for the weather and the most beautiful to me.

There are people walking on the road rather slowly with or without somewhere specific to go. Many of the people know my name though I may not know them. They call out respectfully as I ride by them and ask the traditional question which is more common than hello.

"Where are you going?"

"Thank you for being well,"

I say. "I'm going to town."

"Yes. Good bye."

This is a conversation which varies only slightly. I make a turn onto the main street. School has finished and the street is dangerously packed with pedestrians, cars and bicycles. Buses speeding without heed or worry pass cringingly close to the unruffled students who walk two or three deep. The children all wear uniforms of their specific school: green for the Mormons, maroon for the Seventh Day Adventists, light blue for the Catholics, dark blue for the Anglicans, navy blue for the Wesleyans, and bright orange for the Free Church of Tonga. They make a bright parade as they wander to their various places. I have several close collisions which I'm used to by now. As I pass the many people I again marvel at the amount of them who know my name. The ones in orange uniforms know me as their teacher. "Good bye" I hear again and again. The closer I get to town the more people clog the street and the more dangerously the cars, buses and bicycles weave in and out to avoid them and each other.

I enter the business district of Nuku'alofa and head for the market. It's a lovely place that sells everything that grows or is made. Two long rows of sheltered tables with cubicles along the outside edge make up this open market place. It's a feast of not only food but of experiences. I have learned to use the Tongan language to the extent that I can fully appreciate the delightful Tongan dialogue that takes place at the market. One must know the correct times to joke or to be serious, to buy, bargain, or be silent. I go now to a table that is loaded with avocados hoping to get one ripe enough for tonight. The woman behind the counter is an old friend by now.

"Thank you for working," I say.

"Yes. Thank you for shopping."

"Is this one ripe?" I give the fruit a gentle squeeze.

"Yes, just right."

"For tonight?"

"Yes, good for tonight."

"What about tomorrow?"

"It will still be ripe tomorrow."

"And for next week?" I smile.

"And if you put it into the ground and grow a tree it will be ripe in five years," she says wittily. Tongans are always right on cue.

"How much?" I ask.

"Only five seniti" (about seven cents U.S.). I make a face.

"Too much."

"No, the price is all right."

I look at her friends who all agree with her. I dig out my last four seniti and hold it in my hand before them.

"Pitiful me," I say with mock sadness and they respond with mock sympathy.

"Four seniti is all right," she says.

"Sure?"

She assures me with a smile. I thank her graciously and then she asks the other most usual question:

"Where is your boyfriend?"

I've learned to handle this in various ways. Today I point to the oldest, most withered of her male fellow shopkeepers and say, "That handsome one there." I am rewarded by an enormous gale of laughter.

"Here." She hands me a ripe avocado. "A gift."

"A gift? For me?"

"Yes. You eat one and your boyfriend can eat one."

"But I have no boyfriend." Of course they don't believe me.

"Then you can eat two."

Back on my bike again I ride towards home, having to slow down for a family of pigs that is crossing the road. Pigs are a food with social value; they are served at all ceremonial gatherings such as funerals, weddings, birthday feasts and other significant events. The number of pigs killed for a celebration gives us an idea as to how big the event was. Chickens, dogs and cats are nearly equal to pigs in population and

also in consumption. The dogs are all thin and inevitably have mournfully sad eyes. The concept of dog as man's best friend doesn't pull any weight here, I'm afraid, and when you see a Tongan dog the thought of taking him by the neck and giving him a big hug is the furthest thing from your mind

I head towards the ocean and find a whole different view of Tonga. Riding along this street shows us the side of Tonga that we were probably more prepared for: The tall palms framing your view of the ocean. Small islands jut out above the water on the horizon and beyond. The water is as blue as you saw in the travel poster (I'll pretend that the sun is out this day so you might see the blueness of it) and the sun glitters on the water like tumbling, living jewels. The sky is a matching blue in a lighter shade and a salty breeze blows up the smell of seaweed and soggy sand. I pass the big wharf where tourists by the score pour out of boats and onto the streets for an afternoon or a week and then pour back on. Further on is a smaller wharf where naked children are swimming like slippery sardines. I long to join them and I can remember the feel of the water as if I had just gotten out of it, myself, and was still feeling the sting of salt. The water is thick and soft; it holds a person up easily as if it were cooperating fully. The ocean always makes me a bit dreamy and dreamily I continue on, turning towards my side of the island.

I notice again, with amazement, how every nook and cranny has a house on it, as if everyone just came upon an empty place and quickly built a house. Children, usually naked, stare at me wide-eyed as I pass. Sometimes they spout out their entire English vocabulary in one breath: "Hello, goodbye, good morning" then turning to their companions they burst into a frenzy of giggles, in awe of their bravery. I pass coconut trees and banana trees and skinny tapioca stalks. The same tree-like plant, tapioca, grows in Africa and Asia. The starchy root can be pounded, ground, boiled or mashed depending on where you are. Tongans, who like to do things the easiest way, boil it whole.

The climate is such that everything is done with as much reservation of energy as possible. Even the traditional Tongan dances look lazy. The earth has never had to be coaxed to bring forth an abundance of food and there have never been wild animals to hide from or become more clever than. The lack of stimulation has slowed them and their thinking down to a nice, comfortable pace.

All in all, though Tonga will pop most of the bubbles you have in your imagination concerning the romantic and balmy South Pacific, it does hold true with many of the things you will have heard. For example, Polynesians really do sleep under fragrant trees on warm Sundays and the sound of ukuleles really does drift through the air on quiet evenings and the young boys really do climb coconut trees. And when there is nowhere else for them to go to get the privacy which is so needed and yet so rare, they climb up into one of those famous trees, tie themselves in and sleep or sit for hours watching the world below go on without them.

Tonga is growing up now. Just like my kid brother is growing up in America. And just like hundreds of young nations are growing up. These kids and these nations are different than the others who grew up before them. They are asking different questions and learning different things. And we must have different answers for them. We must help them to grow in a new way. We must help them heartistically and physically grow into individuals who will help their nation and nations that will help the world.