

GUEST EDITORIAL

CHALLENGING *LAUKOVI*: SAMPLES OF WEST POLYNESIA REPATRIATES

This editorial focuses idiographically on Samoans and Tongans who – after expatriate tenure in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia – have been returned to their home nations. Upon and after re-entry, they are often stigmatised as drug dealers, masterminds of burglary, and/or instigators of riot.

In March 2010, New Zealand's Broadcasting Standards Authority found that a TV One news segment regarding Samoan 'thugs', broadcast April 2009, had been 'unbalanced'. Among other points, the segment suggested that, after being deported from overseas, some young repatriates had been dealing marijuana and methamphetamine to minors in order to smuggle high powered weaponry from the U.S. and China (Adjudication of Complaint 2009-066, BSA, 2 March 2010¹). A complaint against TV One was lodged by Samoa's attorney general to redress the 'denigration of Samoan society', resulting in the network having to air specific retractions and modestly indemnify both the Samoan government and New Zealand Crown.

In neighbouring Tonga, where I was a social scientist in the late 1990s and again in the late Naughts, slander against 'deportees' is not uncommon: in informal conversation, they have often been blamed for instigating the political riot in the capital in November 2006 and advising (if not planning and/or executing) epidemics of burglary that rage from time to time.

Shortly after the BSA ruling, I sought to assess the legal history of repatriates to Tonga. The issue was worth settling: over the past decade, over 750 Tongans have been repatriated – nearly three-quarters of one percent of the population. Unfortunately, methodology was menaced by the following impediments:

- *Government regulation*: The Kingdom of Tonga has over the years asserted the right to forbid survey research it deems either unauthorised

by an academic institution or insufficiently funded (see e.g., Government of Tonga Research Conditions, Office of the Prime Minister, 2003). At the time, Tonga's qualifications board was questioning the right of the Tongan university with which I was affiliated to hold itself out as such; consequently, I was loathe to request permission until the issue was resolved.

- *Subject identification and cooperation:* Even had permission been obtained, it would have been difficult locating the subject population. The identities of many repatriates are not publicly known. Moreover, it is questionable whether convicted repatriates would have agreed to participate ... and if only law-abiding subjects had taken part, the validity of the survey would have been compromised.

POLICE DATA

In late 2008, New Zealand's police liaison in Australia, Chris Kelley, became the first *palangi* [white foreigner] in the Kingdom's history to head the Tonga Police Force since the Force's inception in 1868 (Commissioner Kelley's contract was not renewed in August 2011). Among other reforms in his initial biennium, Kelley augmented community policing; as part of this interactive approach, he agreed to the academic dissemination of TPF statistics regarding repatriation.² Accordingly, I presented the data to a colloquium of social scientists at the University of Otago in February 2011.³

The data address the following variables regarding deportees from January 2001 through September 2010:

- *Number of repatriates variously crossed with:* gender, age group, year of repatriation, deporting nation, three categorical reasons for repatriation, and six criminal reasons for repatriation;
- *Number of repatriate re-offenders crossed with:* year of re-offense.

Prior to producing the data, TPF cautioned that its statistics were imperfect for the following reasons:

- Citing privacy concerns, Australia's immigration department often refuses to alert Tonga regarding repatriation of Tongan nationals;
- The data only report reasons for repatriation for some 70% of the subject population;

- The TPF does not typically record whether a given offender in Tonga is or isn't a repatriate.

These are serious deficiencies. But if one is willing to tolerate them, the sample challenges the following stereotypes presumed by Tongan *laukovi* [malicious gossip]:

Deportees have been returned from California: In fact, slightly more of the sample were repatriated from New Zealand than the U.S.

Deportees were young gangbangers: Nearly two-thirds of the sample is between the ages of 30 and 50.

Deportees were dangerous criminals: Only slightly more than a quarter of the sample have apparently been repatriated for crimes with victims.

Deportees were drug dealers: Only three percent of the sample was repatriated for drug violations.

Deportees often re-offend in Tonga: Only three deportees re-offended from January 2008-September 2010.

Deportees instigated the riot of November 2006: Of nearly 600 people convicted of rioting in 2006, only three (some 0.5%) were deportees.⁴ This suggests that deportees were somewhat less likely to riot than the rest of the population.

Indeed, in contradiction to the above presumptions, the sample supports the following repatriate median: A male between 30 and 50 years old, repatriated for immigration violations from either New Zealand or the U.S. between the years 2002 and 2004. Whilst failing to secure standard employment upon returning to Tonga (see: Social Work *infra*), he nevertheless does not re-offend.

SOCIAL WORK

The Free Wesleyan Church, which counts over a third of Tongans as members, has sought to assist repatriates. One of its ministers, Rev Filifai'esea Lilo, established the Lifeline service in 1989 to counsel emotionally disturbed youth, then expanded its focus to counsel repatriates, among other groups, in 2001. In 2010-11, he was aided in this regard by an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development with a joint degree in law and international relations.

Because repatriates are sometimes ostracised by their *kainga* [extended family], Lifeline initially offers them gratis housing in its staffed safe house in the Vaolōloa district of Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. To render repatriates employable, the service additionally invites them to attend a gratis skills training class meeting four mornings per week. Yet because of Tonga's ailing economy, Lifeline estimates it has only been able to secure employment for some 20% of the subject population.⁵

RESEARCH HORIZON

When misinformed – as it sometimes is – *laukovi* can destroy reputations and render social innovations dysfunctional. Regional social science can – and should – play a role in exposing unsubstantiated generalisation about social groups within its purview.

With respect to repatriates, challenging *laukovi* requires comprehensive proactive research – specifically, research that coordinates the following international efforts:

More Robust Data: If TPF's assessment is valid, Australian Immigration must be persuaded to more fully cooperate with island police forces, even if that requires statutory reform in Canberra. Police forces in the islands must be persuaded to query the background of offenders, even if that too requires statutory alteration. No repatriate ought to be re-admitted unless the reason for his or her repatriation is furnished by the deporting nation.

Cross-National Correlation and Comparison: The Samoa Police Service must be encouraged to develop and disseminate its own robust data so a comparative study within the region may be completed. Australian, New Zealand, and the U.S. must be persuaded to provide their own statistics on repatriation, in order to provide correlates with island data.

If none of these initiatives are undertaken, research on repatriates will be limited to the evidence cited in this editorial. Repatriate victims of *laukovi* deserve more robust support.

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NOTES

- 1 In an e-message 28 March 2011, BSA's legal manager confirmed that her agency found that the broadcast segment had, among other violations, exaggerated the relationship between the vending of drugs and the acquisition of overseas weaponry in Samoa.
- 2 See among author's papers: 'Tonga Police Deportee Stats, 2001–Sept 2010, TPF Community Intelligence Network, 1 November 2010; Official TPF letter, 1 November 2010.
- 3 'Repatriated Tongan Nationals: International Criminals or Hapless Overstayers?' Anthropology Seminar Series, University of Otago, 10 February 2011.
- 4 Official TPF letter, *op cit*, p. 2, 1 November 2010.
- 5 Author's interview with Rev Filifai'esea Lilo, Free Wesleyan Church, Nuku'alofa, 26 October 2010.