

Do You Really Understand the Tongans to do Business and Relate Well with Them?

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Abstract

In this qualitative paper, a business professor suggests several vital advices and pointers to tourists and businesspeople on the language, culture and values of Tonga, a kingdom in the South Pacific; these learning points can enable one to better appreciate things Tongan and thus better able to do business and relate with the Tongans while in Tonga. An interesting outcome or offshoot of this study is that the study also leads to revealing what Tongan culture and values help and/ or hinder human resource management practices in Tonga.

Keywords: Doing business, Tonga, Tongan language, Tongan culture and values

Introduction

Perched just east of the international date-line (Lonely Planet, 2014), this collection of “Friendly Islands” was united into a Polynesian kingdom in 1845, and Tonga became a constitutional monarchy in 1875 and a British protectorate in 1900. “Never formally colonized” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16197014>), Tonga pulled out from the protectorate and joined the Commonwealth of Nations in 1970; Tonga today remains the only monarchy in the Pacific (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tn.html>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16197014>). (Please Figure 1).

Figure 1 below shows the location of Tonga and the South Pacific islands [source: Jasons.com, 2014, 2015]:



Paper's Objectives

The author has uncovered that while there might be many books, even touristy booklets and brochures on Tonga, but few have had been written on doing business in Tonga; this thus floats out the appropriateness and relevance of the paper.

It is worthy to note that Tonga regained command of foreign affairs after its complete independence in 1970. Even after this, however, foreigners who came to Tonga to work were limited mainly to people who were on government mission (administrators and volunteers) from such countries as New Zealand, Australia, U.S.A., Japan and Taiwan. In the 1990's, however, there was a sudden change in this situation with the arrival of Chinese (from the People's Republic of China: PRC) who came to Tonga to reside and open shops.

This brought about a crisis or a 'Not-so-Friendly Islands' among many Tongans; Tongans who were only familiar with their own ways of doing business could not compete with the newly arrived Chinese shop keepers and had to close down their shops.

The apprehension and alarm, the riot in 2006 (Maola, 2009) that overtook Tongans all of a sudden was then coupled with prejudice blended with fear that arose from not knowing the ways and behavior — or overall culture — of the newcomers, but worse, the newcomers too did not know that of the Tongans. This was undoubtedly one of the key factors that led to the robberies and burning of Chinese shops during the riot in 2006. It is presumed that this kind of violence could have been avoided, if there had been better communications and relationships between Tongans and Chinese.

It has now been eight years since the tragedy that took place in 2006 and the changing situation concerning Chinese shop keepers and Tongans is visible, and Chinese shops are now accepted as integral part of Tongan villages such as in Houma, Nukunuku, Fasi; Kolovai and Lapaha.

“Tongans are strongly influenced by their culture, traditions, religion and whatever changes experienced by their society” (one interviewee’s inputs). It seems overall, the Tongans want to retain their Tonganness and identity, and even in the field of politics, Kalafi Maola, an author/ broadcaster and publisher (cited in Brown, 2009) has expressed these, “When Tongans express a sense for democracy there is also a voice saying “please don’t touch my Tonganness, my identity that was established over 3000 years ago”. In view of the things that have had happened since the 1990’s, it is critically important to reflect on how to do business with the Tongans; more specifically to better able to do business (perhaps not changing directly or blatantly any Tongan cultural or value features) while relating with the Tongans (but or so as to find out the best way to avoid strife and set up a more congenial environment in which the both parties — sellers and buyers — profit, having a win-win or of mutual gains from each other).

Hence, it is the key intention, aim and objectives of this paper to suggest helpful hints and various guidance pointers to tourists and businesspeople on the language, culture and values of Tonga, a peaceful kingdom in the South Pacific so that they can better appreciate the Tongan language and things Tongan and thus being better able to do business while relating with the Tongans.

Literature Review

Who are the Tongans?

Since the Tongan language was not written down until the 19th century, the early history of Tonga (which means “south”; “land lying in the south”; everyculture.com, 2104) is based on oral or spoken tradition. Hereditary absolute kings (Tu’i Tonga) date back to Ahoeitu in the 10th century (Encyclopedia.com, 2014; everyculture.com, 2104).

Today, Tonga’s population has remained at around 100,000 people (UNDP, 2013). 96.6 percent of the total population of Tonga is Tongans (Polynesians) while part-Tongan consists of 1.7% and others 1.7% while unspecified consists of 0.03% (2006 estimated) (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tn.html>). The Kingdom has a young population with a median age of 21 years. More than one-third (38%) of the population is under 15 years of age, with 8% 60 years and older. Life expectancy is considered high at 70.2 overall (67.3 for males and 73.0 for females) (UNDP, 2013). The World Bank classifies Tonga as an upper middle income country (<http://data.worldbank.org/news/new-country-classifications>). As of 1 July 2013, the World Bank income classifications by GNI per capita are as follows:

- Low income: \$1,035 or less
- Lower middle income: \$1,036 to \$4,085
- Upper middle income: \$4,086 to \$12,615
- High income: \$12,616 or more

Low- and middle-income economies are sometimes referred to as developing economies (<http://data.worldbank.org/news/new-country-classifications>).

(Please also see Figure 2 which shows the bigger map of Tongatapu Group/ other islands).

Figure 2 below shows the location of Tonga [Formerly known as Friendly Islands]
[source: <http://wpp.greenwichmeantime.com/time-zone/pacific/tonga/map-tonga/>]:

Particularly evident on Sundays is the pervasive-hold Christianity has taken of Tonga. In any town from almost every spot, Sunday mornings is a time to listen to choirs' praising their Lord and preachers explain the saving grace of Jesus Christ (Tonga on the Net, 2104).

Research Methodology

The study is dependent on a series of interviews – each time approximately 35 to 45 minutes though several interviews with breaks in-between stretched to an hour plus – with forty-one (41) Tongan professionals or Tongans who were working in the various government ministries and including some who were in the hotel and/or tourist and services industries. The key task in interviewing is to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say or express (Kvale, 1996). Interviews are particularly useful for getting the story behind a respondent's experiences and interpretations. Using open or probing questions, the interviewers can pursue in-depth information around the topic.

In this research, the interview research method was used, and key informant interviewing was applied. The interview period was from 16 October 2014 till 16 December 2014 – a period of two months. After the author left Tonga on 7 November, he continued with email follow-ups and what's app messages which were helpful as he was able to clarify with several interviewees on their experiences and viewpoints.

Key informant interviews differ from other forms of interview principally because respondents are chosen because of their idiosyncratic, specialized knowledge instead of being randomly chosen to sample the issue the researchers are investigating, and this has important consequences for design (Jankowicz, 2005: 276 -279).

The technique is believed to be both helpful and useful since:

- o Defining the basic characteristics of some issues by drawing on the personal experiences and understanding of the people, their core values and practices involved; the way in which such concepts as 'Tongan culture/ ways in Tongan', for example, are understood and interpreted in practice(s) in the given environment or setting.
- o Identifying the boundaries, constraints and extremes within which these definitions are seen to apply.
- o Increasing the researchers' knowledge of the Tonga language, culture and values and or the people's main habits.

This interview method is really useful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from these practitioner-interviewees, being Tongans themselves. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); and they were crafted as follows:

1. How and what are the ways in which foreigners (wanting to do business here) can understand the Tongans better?
2. What are your perceptions of ways to better relate with the Tongans? If so, what is the basis or reasons for such perceptions? If not, why not?
3. What core values of the Tongans, do you think, help or hinder when doing business with them?
4. Are there any lessons or benefits to be gleaned from here?

Findings

Table 1. The interviewees and their comments on the ways to better understand the Tongans.

Interviewees' Comments

Number of interviewees/ Percentage (%)

The interviewees perceived these key pointers as good advice to tourists and businesspeople on the language, culture and values of Tonga so as to better relate with the Tongans when one should:

Understand the Tongan Language and Culture

"It is always good to know something of the language of the Tongans"; "most naturalized Chinese in Tongans easily pick up speaking the Tongan language and they are able to do retailing or sell things to the local population".

41 (100)

Be Aware of the Tongans' Christian Outlook

"Sunday is a day of rest"; "the Tongans are Christians". 41 (100)
 "We go to church; eat, rest and sleep. There's no work done on Sundays." "In a way, Christianity creates homogeneity or a sense of commonness at the workplace".

Give Gifts and Practice Gift-exchanges

In both, "both parties give gifts"; "gifts are exchanged". 41 (100)
 "It is often considered very rude to refuse a gift from someone."

Comprehend that the Tongans Respect their Old/ elders

"Respect to seniors is an important aspect that business or human resource people should be aware". "The years of service and experiences of the seniors should be respected". 41 (100)
 "The seniors are usually regarded as wise".

Understanding that the Tongans are Community-based People

Sharing is "a core value"; one must share to show one's care towards others". "Most Tongans are feeling people"; "they are feeling-centered" Interviewees also spoke of the "family" ("kainga"), "sharing", "togetherness" and "community-living", and "most rituals are also carried out in a group" 38 (92.6)

Be Marketing-driven

Business people need to fully understand the Tongan culture to be marketing-oriented and meet the needs of the Tongans"; "suiting to the Tongans' taste". 38 (92.6)

Practice Honesty (and Integrity) When Dealing with the Tongans

"Tongans like people who are honest"; "honesty and integrity ("angatonu mo faitotonu") coincides with the Christian values they uphold". 38 (92.6)

Be Friendly and warm and Be Relationship-centered

One must "be friendly to do business with the Tongans"; "a smiling, friendly face can attract sales, businesses and generate good relationships" 36 (87.8)

Be of the Planning Sort and Have a Prepared Way of Running Things

"Do not be swept by the islanders' unstructured ways". 30 (73.1)
 "Time is not important and hence, delays or postponements occur, and that can hinder planning or even preparations."

Analysis and Discussions

To do business and better relate with the Tongans, businesspeople should be doing or performing better by:

Understanding the Tongan Language and Culture

It is worthy to note that both Tongan and English are taught in schools across the Kingdom, and on the major islands of Tongatapu and Vava'u (Tonga Tourist Authority, 2014). And although almost everyone speaks English as a second language (Tonga Tourist Authority, 2014), it is good and, in effect, makes perfect sense to know and speak a language to understand the culture as well as to connect with the society and community in which one does business with.

The language indeed has the power to reflect culture and influence thinking was first proposed by an American linguist and anthropologist, Edward Sapir (1884–1939), and his student, Benjamin Whorf (1897–1941) (Otto, 2013). The Sapir–Whorf proposition stated that the way we think and view the world is determined by our language (Anderson and Lightfoot, 2002, cited in Otto, 2013). And that culture is indelibly linked to language is undeniable, for language is a vehicle or tool by which it is transmitted (Fielding, 2013).

All interviewees (100%) opined that “(it is) easy to understand if one is willing to learn the Tongan language”. It is worthy to also note that business people or for that matter, anyone can learn a language well when (s)he is forced to speak; (s)he needs to converse and converse – very much as Manson (2012) pointed out, “If there’s a “secret” or “hack” to learning a new language, it’s this: hours and hours of awkward and strenuous conversation with people better than you in that language. An hour of conversation (with corrections and a dictionary for reference) is as good as five hours in a classroom and 10 hours with a language course by yourself.” “Most naturalized Chinese in Tongans easily pick up speaking the Tongan language and they are able to do retailing or sell things to the local population” (several interviewees’ inputs). While English is widely spoken in Tonga, the country has its own Polynesian language which is closely related to Samoan, Hawaiian, Tahitian and Maori. The official name for the Tongan language is “lea fakatonga”. In the Tongan alphabet, there are only 16 letters versus the 26 used in English (VirtualTourist.com, 2014).

Interestingly, one interviewee opined these, “Tonga may be the only country where the mother tongue is arranged into the three social statuses. The King alone has a set of language used for himself only, the nobles have a different set of language and the comers where most Tongans belong use has a different set of language. For example, to ‘eat’ in English is ‘taumafa’ for the King, ‘ilo’ for the nobles and ‘kai’ for the commoners, but they all mean ‘eat’. We are all raised with the Tongan language as our first language, and we continue to use it throughout our lives. At work, human resources (people) are required to be fluent both in English and Tongan languages. For example, sometimes employees are requested to escort high dignitaries in the Kingdom. The Tongan employee must know how to address the King in his language, address a noble or a minister in his language so as to be effective and efficient in his role” (One interviewee’s inputs).

“Within the (Tongans’) relationship, courtesy, loyalty, sharing and love are very much part of the (Tongan) social structure. In this sense of structure or ‘Kainga’ there is always a headship person to relate to. It is very clear in this society knowing who people relate to, family, ‘kainga’, village, and nation and within this nation, the head.” (Moala, cited in Brown, 2009).

Indeed to add, if one is a business owner, understanding the Tongan culture and about core Tongan value of relationships helps one to manage or deal well with one’s employees. And to the author, knowing and understanding the Tongan language would also imply that one should and could make “small talk to draw them (the Tongans) to open up and speak” or “even to share stories and experiences; one can then understand the Tongans or the issues faced better” (several interviewees’ inputs). One linguistic expert, Dr. Akihisa Tsukamoto indicated that “Tongan, like other Polynesian languages, makes use of a relatively small number of distinct sounds (i.e., only those sounds that most other languages use) so it is not very difficult for most foreigners to pronounce Tongan words. Since most Tongans speak only Tongan in their daily life, it is probably very important to be able to speak at least some Tongan (words) to be regarded as a member (in-group) of their society. It is difficult to learn Tongan perfectly (as in the case of other languages) but it is also true that, in many situations, the use of key words alone can help a lot to make oneself understood.”

Many interviewees also opined the need to take note and better appreciate the Tongans’ etiquette attire; they spoke of, “The attire of a Tongan can distinguish them in a group of people. The attire for men includes a skirt (‘tupenu’) and a mat (‘ta’ovala’) worn around the waist and hold in place with a belt (‘kafa’). In addition, a shirt (‘sote’) and a tie (‘hekesi’) are to complete the attire. Women wear long dresses or a top with a ‘tupenu’ as well as a ‘ta’ovala’ or decorated ‘kafa’ (‘kiekie’). The attire of a Tongan can really help the Company’s human resources to presenting a more professional appearance to customers, visitors, and the general public.” “It also endorses a positive working environment where it limits the likely distractions from provocative or inappropriate dress.” Although these emphasize the Tongan traditional formal attire, they generally-speaking, coincide with human resources practices elsewhere that help since after all, “there is ample evidence to indicate that appearance plays an all important role in... career success” (Stone, 2013: 411).

Being Aware of the Tongans’ Christian Outlook

It is helpful to know that “religion plays a huge part in Tongan life” (VirtualTourist.com, 2014; everyculture.com, 2104). Over 98% of Tongans are Christians (Encyclopedia.com, 2014). Though freedom of religion is stated in the constitution and there is no state religion, the constitution does also stipulate that Sunday is the official Sabbath day. As such, the government restricts the operation of a large number of businesses on Sunday.

The Tongan Broadcasting Commission also upholds a policy which restricts broadcasts of any religious tenets that are not within the mainstream Christian tradition (Encyclopedia.com, 2014). Being a vigorously religious nation, Tongan stores, shops, restaurants and cafes punctually shut at midnight on Saturday night and (some) reopen at midnight on Sunday - most commercial outlets are closed on Sundays, as it is the holy day of rest. It is suggested that one sorts out all one's material needs before the Sunday arrives (VirtualTourist.com, 2014).

"Religion (understanding Christianity and the Tongans' Christian outlook) can be helpful in getting your foot in the door". All interviewees (100%) addressed the fact that "business people should be fully aware that the Tongans are Christians". The Tongans "go to church; eat, rest and sleep. There's no work done on Sundays" (several interviewees' inputs). These match with what that have been said, that is, Tonga is "a deeply conservative, Christian country" (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16197014>; VirtualTourist.com, 2014; everyculture.com, 2104).

Giving Gifts and Practicing Gift-Exchanges

Normally, "both parties give gifts" (several interviewees' inputs); Tongans love to make presentations and want their guests to feel honored and special. Even if they cannot afford anything, they will go all out to make a guest feel welcome and pampered. It would be smart to bring a small gift of food or something from your hometown to present to someone with whom you are working closely. Note that gifts are usually not opened in public but there is speech-giving and lots of pomp and circumstance that goes along with presenting the gift. Flowers are appropriate gifts on special occasions such as weddings or funerals. "It is often considered very rude to refuse a gift from someone." (several interviewees' inputs; Culture Crossing, 2014).

Of significance, one interviewee intimated that "In the Tongan culture, when someone gives you a gift as an appreciation of carrying out your duties then you must accept it otherwise it is rude. However, in the Public Service Code of Ethics and Conduct 2010, employees of the public service must 'not ask for or accept a gift from any person concerned with any matter connected with the employee's official duties'. This clearly shows a 'contradiction' between the culture and values of Tongans with the Law which leads Human Resources Managers to struggle especially when dealing with disciplinary cases. This can in most ways be a barrier in terms of cultural factors or values hindering human resources practices in Tonga." Nonetheless, this helps to avoid or reduce the occurrence of corruption or bribes.

Interestingly many interviewees also highlighted that, "cultural factors here in Tonga itself are flawless unless an individual take it in a destructive, harmful way or take it to gain advantage for themselves, such as for example, using the "tauhi-va" (which can also be interpreted as up-keeping an ongoing relationship). In some organisations here in Tonga, some crafty employees try their best to be as close as possible to those who have the authority. When they do so, it would be easier for them to do things in their favor since it would be hard or difficult to discipline them since they already established a strong and solid relationship with persons of authority (and influence)". This author indeed agrees with an interviewee's inputs here, that is, overall "anyone – even as a Christian, needs to indeed uphold one's honesty and integrity; basically, it's how one applies such cultural values or practices that may hinder business and even human resources practices here in Tonga".

Comprehending that the Tongans Respect their Old/ elders

All interviewees (100%) agreed that an important core value: "respect (fakaapaapa) to seniors is an important aspect that business or human resource people should be aware"; "the years of service and experiences of the seniors should be respected"; and "the seniors can be considered as wise". That being the case, one could also argue that in most ways, ageism especially against the older employees would indeed be reduced or minimized in Tonga.

"In the Tongan culture, respect is given to the King, nobility and elders and in the work place it is given to your superiors and those who more senior than you. In certain circumstances where there is an open discussion or brainstorming, those who strictly practice the Tongan culture will refrain from making any comments especially if it contradicts ideas or views of a more senior colleague". It follows thus that "obviously, this will mean that the organization will miss out on those (new) wonderful (or innovative) ideas that could have been raised by staff of lower ranks" (one interviewee's inputs). The "tauhi-va" factor or principle (one viewpoint of "tauhi-va" is that it is taken as knowing oneself or one's position and not overstepping one's boundaries of relationships with others) may then come in. Potentially so, this can thus lead to a decrease in creativity, innovation and productivity and can, in most ways, hinder human resources practices.

Interpreted as “keeping the relationships going” (one interviewee’s inputs), “tauhi-va” can also be unproductive especially so when Tongans avoid conflict and agree with others’ (seniors’) ideas even though they might be bad idea(s) that will cost the organization much or “a lot of money”.

Understanding that the Tongans are Community-based People

Every Tongan village has a community house where ceremonial cloth (“tapa”) is made by groups of women. The Tongan Women’s Progressive Association, formed in 1956, conducts programs for the betterment of village conditions and holds classes in various subjects. There is a national chapter of the Red Cross Society (Encyclopedia.com, 2014). And it is also worthy to note that the Tongan Government has actively encouraged the extension of consumer cooperatives, and the Tonga Chamber of Commerce and Industry is in Nuku’alofa (Encyclopedia.com, 2014).

The majority of the interviewees (38 in number or 92.6 %) expressed that “sharing” and “humility of the heart” are “core values”, they “should be practiced”; one should “share to show that one cares”. “Gift-giving is a sign of generosity among the Tongans” (several interviewees’ inputs).

One interviewee reported that, “The humility of the heart enriches the (Tongan’s) quality service to be prosperous and productive. From a Tongan perspective, humility is one of the Tonga core values which exhort and nurture the Tongan to be proactive in community and sharing. Firstly, humility comes from a heart full of grace and love; a spirit of thanksgiving and joy to offer time, talent and passion to work for the benefits of all. The family functions in Tonga such as in events such as weddings, funerals and birthdays; these are community functions too. Everybody is related to each other; and people are willing to help each other so there is no isolation or individualization”.

“Most Tongans are feeling people”; “they are feeling-centered” (several interviewees’ inputs). Several interviewees spoke of the “family” (“kainga”) and its “togetherness”, reflecting the extended family and communal living. The Tongans are “community-based” or “communal people”, and “most rituals are also carried out in a group”. And one interviewee suggested that the key belief in sharing is due to the fact that “the Tongans live in an extended family way”, and that they “show their caring by sharing” (several interviewees’ inputs). Indeed one interviewee also specifically mentioned that Tongans must truly have the “heart” (“loto lo”) or ready for others. These can be construed as another reason for sharing, corresponding with the core Christian value of love (John, 13: 34-35; Access-Jesus.com, 2014). Thus, foreigners or for that matter “(anyone) should not be selfish” as this can, in most ways, be a relationship put-off or a hindrance when dealing with the Tongans.

Intriguingly, “there is a Tongan proverb that goes, “Kai pe te ‘ete veka” (literally, it means one eats one’s own pooh; this is referring to selfish attitude or ways that may go against the grain of community living and sharing; for example, one brings one’s own food but he eats it by himself, refusing to share it with others)” (one interviewee’s inputs). If one wants to do business in Tonga then one has to believe and act on sharing while ensuring that the mutual benefits exist to both parties especially to the local community; there should be sharing and communal living.

This helps much: “Loto-to” (what may be referred to as humility and openness to learning) is valued in the Tongan society. Indeed, “a certain degree of ‘loto-to’ is good for productivity and for the work environment as a whole. Mostly there is no conflict; colleagues can discuss their views and differences in a nice way, friendly atmosphere and with mutual respect” (several interviewees’ inputs). One can also assess that this community living trait can promote teambuilding/ spirit; more so, after all, as one interviewee pertinently said, “Tongans work perfectly in group settings. They shine when it comes to team work because they are used to living in extended families which promotes sharing and open communications”.

Being Marketing-Driven

In marketing, it is always important that the business companies and business people meet their customer needs, and to do this, it’s critical to find out exactly what it is that their customers expect from them and how customers want their needs met (MarketingTeacher.com, 2014; BusinessKnowledgeSource.com, 2010).

38 interviewees or 92.6 % of all the interviewees expressed the need to fully understand the Tongan way of life, and thus understanding their preferences and tastes.

There is “a strong need for foreigners” and business people to “fully understand the Tongan culture to be marketing-oriented and meet the needs of the Tongans”; “suited to the Tongans’ taste”. “It would be better if they come and stay with the Tongans and know them better” (several interviewees’ inputs).

Practicing Honesty (and Integrity) When Dealing with the Tongans

38 interviewees or 92.6 % of the total number of interviewees voiced out that “(the) Tongans like people who are honest” and “honesty and integrity (“angatonu mo faitotonu”) coincides with the Christian values they uphold”. Tonga is after all, “a deeply conservative, Christian country” (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-16197014>; everyculture.com, 2104).

One interviewee spoke of these, “Religion is also valued in the workplace. In this sense, religion is a value that help human resource practices in Tonga. In a way, Christianity creates homogeneity or a sense of commonness at the workplace. Besides, with religion, it helps with the human resource practice ‘enforce’ lesser corporate fraud. It is taught that it is wrong to perform unethical behaviors therefore, when religion is being reminded at the workplace”

Another interviewee opined that “the Tongan people promote honesty and integrity (“angatonu mo faitotonu”) in the workplace. If the employer is honest with its Tongan employees, these employees will indeed keep their integrity at the workplace. This would boost the ability of the human resources to well or better in getting work done or even fostering a fraud-free corporate culture. Further, if one’s boss is honest with his or her words concerning overtime payments, his (her) promise for pay rise and other incentives, the Tongan people will likely to double up their efforts and do work given to them. They would also love to do whatever their boss wants them to do, and they can and would work hard, even doing what the bosses did not ask they to do. That’s the spirit of the Tongans.”

He also added that, “integrity (‘mateaki’) has its importance having these various elements of dedication (mateaki), loyalty (‘faitotonu’), trust (‘falala’anga’), faithfulness (‘faitotonu’), make an attempt (‘feingamalohi’, ‘feinga’), and try harder or make an effort (malohi).

Punctuality (tauhi taimi) is also a vital part of ‘mateaki’. The Biblical version of integrity (‘mateaki’) in the Tongan manner is to say no or deny oneself, lifting up one’s cross (here, cross means one has to suffer and die, going through blood, sweat, tears as well as sacrificing to be Jesus Christ-like).”

Interestingly, in order to get rid of corruption or nurture a corporate fraud-free culture, there is a need for the manager to apply the Tongan cultural practices. The human resources manager needs to apply the Tongan words, “toe keli takai”, meaning “having to dig around repeatedly”. (S)he needs to constantly monitor and check the recalcitrant as well as patiently cultivate good practices and working habits in the same way as farmers, having to dig around, loosening and using more soil so that plant can be better planted, cultivated and made healthy again. And indeed become fruitful.

Being Friendly and Warm and Being Relationship-Centered

“Tongan people are naturally friendly as experienced by the explorer Capt. Cook when he discovered Tonga in 1777. Foreigners also would experience the friendliness of the people once they get to know the locals well.” (several interviewees’ inputs).

“Friendly” Tongans are “often willing to help” (36 interviewees’ inputs; 87.8%). There is, however, a caveat here, several interviewees (25 interviewees; 60.9%) also suggested “(foreigners should) not to be too friendly as they may take advantage of the business and (truly) not to be over lenient”.

Interestingly, one interviewee spoke of fostering better relationships with the Tongans by “attending (going) to places where they (the Tongans) are going, such as even attending to churches on Sundays with them”. And “eat with them” and “see what they like or what are their preferences” (several interviewees’ inputs). Overall, it can be assessed as Tongans prefer to have foreigners as “business partners” and they work better with “teamwork”, “an important (Tongan) value” (several interviewees’ inputs).

It is worthy to note that overall, “it is good to have small talk to establish rapport and better relationships (between the foreign business partners and the local Tongans)” and of significant interest, “community sharing and teamwork certainly helps the human resources management practices in building a sense of fellowship, fostering esprit de corps and unity as well as having a sense of identity and belonging.

Being of the Planning Sort and Having a Prepared Way of Running Things

30 interviewees or 73.1% of the interviewees opined, urging business people “not (to) be swept by the islanders’ unstructured ways”. “The Tongans are sometimes late and this is considered acceptable. Time is not an issue so they can drop in unannounced and expected you to meet or answer their request.” (one interviewee’s inputs). Do take note of the Tongan Time: “Tonga has its own approach to time. Today may mean tomorrow and half an hour maybe more like two hours or in some cases two days or even a week” (eua-island-tonga.com, 2014).

On one’s part when doing business, one really needs to plan; have one’s “clear, concise (business) objectives and goals”, structure of the business plan, and apply checklists to assist one (Picariello, 2012). Planning can really help one to do business well and be prepared or ready for any contingencies or eventualities.

Then again, is the above the crux of the matter? Let us discuss; to this author, he agrees with Mathews, Debolt and Percival (2014) who said one “really lives” in “real time”. What is more significant is that clock time (there are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours in a day and 365 days in a year) is irrelevant. One does not live in or even have access to clock time. One lives in real time, a world in which all time flies when you are having fun or drags when you are doing your taxes. Real time is relative. And basically, real time is mental; existing between one’s ears and one creates it. Indeed anything one creates, one can manage. And it is time to remove any self-sabotage or self-limitation one has around ‘not having enough time’, or today not being ‘the right time’ to start a business or manage one’s present business aptly. Three ways to spend one’s time: thoughts, conversations and actions in business; one’s work will consist of these three items. As a business person, one may be frequently interrupted or pulled in different directions. While one cannot get rid of interruptions, one does get a say on how much time one will spend on them and how much time one will spend on the thoughts, conversations and actions that will lead one to success. Or as Jack Kornfield once said, “In the end, just three things matter: how well we have lived (**done business**); how well we have loved (**and have shared**); how well we have learned to let go” (**in bold**, author’s).

Several other interviewees also pointed out the lack of planning on the part of the Tongans; they highlighted that the “Tongans may feast and spend much money for consumption rather than saving something” as well as “not thinking in the long-term sense”, coinciding and matching with eua-island-tonga.com’s (2014) observation-cum-pointer that “time in Tonga is not very important at all, people are important, food is important but time is not”. [So perhaps to get the Tongans to cooperate and collaborate, to come on time or be punctual and/ or to be productive, one needs to make some food offers, cater or tie-in events with partying and food?]

Of significance too – though this is prescriptive or overall can be imposing onto the Tongans and/or the Tongan culture as well as being narrow or even rigid, several interviewees (specifically 30 interviewees or 73.1%) expressed that “the Tongans should be more business-minded” and “they should learn more from their Chinese counterparts”.

Interestingly, however, another interviewee pointed out that, “Existing Tongans often have strong ties to overseas lands; many Tongans have emigrated to Australia, New Zealand, or the United States to seek employment and a higher standard of living”; “the Tongan diaspora retains close ties to relatives at home” (several interviewees’ inputs; <http://www.virtualoceania.net/tonga/photos/culture/>). Here, indeed business people should see these as opportunities knocking on their doors, tapping the Tongan diaspora as well as networking to generate (more) sales and do good business.

Limitations and Benefits of the Research

One limitation or caveat of the research is that culture is always changing and evolving (or dying). Like any other cultures, the paradigms are shifting; and the thinking as well as the key values too are changing; it is also difficult to indeed isolate particular cultural traits or characteristics which influence Tongans in the Pacific.

In any case, the benefits of the study are to create or give a snapshot of the Tongan ways. The study was also aided by the fact that this researcher also sought the assistance of Dr. Akihisa Tsukamoto, a Tongan language expert, and that, nonetheless, really helped in understanding the Tonga language, culture and ways as well as in writing this research paper.

Nonetheless, stressing on the softer side – and “get(ing) intimate” way of doing business (Crainer, 2007: 61), the study has also more or less created a foundation to think further, extend more reflections on or in fact, serve as a platform for further exploration and study of analyzing the Tongan culture, values and personality or even psyche that support or enhance business developments with or even among the Tongans. The study is also indeed helpful that an interesting offshoot or spinoff of it is that the research also advances to further uncovering what Tongan culture and values help and/ or hinder human resource management practices in Tonga.

Concluding Remarks

As said earlier in the introduction, indeed few have had been written on doing business in Tonga, and hence, from this paper, a snapshot is being made. And indeed much has also been learnt of the style(s) and interesting ways of better relating with the Tongans, if not, to doing business with them. But of course because of modernization, globalization and influences of other cultures outside – especially of the cultures of Tonga’s chief countries-cum-donors such as Australia, New Zealand, Japan and China it deals with, the Tongan ways may change. And exactly what have changed calls for further research and perhaps too, some key ways may indeed stay or remain unchanged. And that too calls for further research.

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