# Migration: Venturing Across and Away from Moananuiākea

By Paige Tengeluk | Talanoa Session credit: Litia Tokalautawa

## What “Migration” Means to the Pasifika Community

Across Moananuiakea, migration dates back to our early ancestors throughout the many Pasifika island nations. Our Pasifika ancestors were wayfinders, or seafarers. As wayfinders, they traveled the vast Pacific with hand-built canoes and utilized the stars as their compass. Our ancestors’ thirst for adventure and journey inspired them to venture out into the sea in hopes of meeting new peoples and sharing our culture with those they come across. Carrying on our ancestors’ legacies and traditions, a growing number of Pasifika folx from various island communities are reviving this form of migration with reconstructing replicas of ancient canoes and traveling across Moananuiākea in hopes to rediscover and reclaim their oceanic heritage.

In the last century, different factors ranging from financial and educational opportunities to climate change and colonialism has forced our Pasifika communities to migrate. For many, if not all, Pasifika communities, migration is becoming more and more unavoidable as external factors increase migration rates. History shows that throughout the Pacific’s history with forced occupation and bloody wars, larger and more developed nations have continued exercising their military power in efforts to deplete our beautiful nations. Such extractive activities tear apart what was once fertile earth feeding many families and sustaining generations of cultural tradition. These same destructive activities are driving our ocean dry, clearing out hundreds of marine life species, decreasing the food supply that Pasifika communities once relied on. Leaving our Pasifika lands and ocean bare has increased financial insecurities leading to poverty and poor health. No longer are Pasifika communities migrating to satisfy their thirst for unseen natural beauty, but for survival. We are migrating, this time unwillingly.

## What is a Challenge Pasifika Communities Currently Face

I had the privilege of engaging in a Talanoa session with a fellow Pasifika woman by the name of Litia Tokalautawa. She is a proud member of the Fijian community in the traditional land of the Nisenan and Miwok tribes, presently known as Sacramento, CA.

In sharing her family's migration story, our discussion dissected into three different parts.

Litia was born in St. Louis Missouri, and as a toddler, her family moved back home to Fiji. After her father received a Bachelor's degree, he realized that he wanted to pursue a degree in higher education. This decision led her family's migration back to St. Louis, Missouri. While her parents focused on maintaining their livelihoods and pursuing higher education, Litia and her siblings faced their new reality of reintegrating into the United States school system. Adjusting to their new life in St. Louis, Missouri—the eighth most segregated city in the country—Litia shared how this journey impacted her mental health. She shared that when adjusting to any new environment and a new chapter of life, one must be willing to make sacrifices. Her family sacrificed their physical relationships with friends and family back home in Fiji. They had to sacrifice a familiar, safe way of life to assimilate to this new one that promised a better future. They had to sacrifice familiar traditions, such as their cultural food in exchange for greasy, affordable on-the-go meals. These sacrifices explain a few of what Litia, her family, and other Pasifika experience and grapple with when migration calls on them.

Litia and her family's migration was called upon in the hopes of achieving higher education. Education is a key area that still takes up space in her community work. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey 2020 details that out of the 102,970 Pasifika people aged 25 and older, 13,418 have less than a high school diploma. This data indicates that 10% of this age population are of working age, but yet due to not obtaining a high school diploma, are facing extremely low-paying jobs while living in our rather expensive state of California. If education is a top contributor of the migration among many Pasifika families, we need to address the root causes of the drop in graduation and educational attainment.

Litia believes that ongoing engagement and support is crucial in this work. She continues to advocate and encourage Pasifika community members in her local community to fight for the many opportunities that this country advertises, but intentionally makes inaccessible for many BIPOC communities. She is an advocate in both her personal and professional lives. From instilling pride and strength in her children to providing a friendly, familiar face to Pasifika people she interacts with in her field of work, Litia carries on the notion that regardless of which island nation we come from, we are a collective people from across Moananuiākea. We are from one Big Blue Continent.

# What Does the Pasifika Community Envision for the Future?

Litia's story resonates with many Pasifika families migrating to the U.S. Education has been a top motivator for many Pasifika families choosing to migrate abroad, primarily to the U.S. where there exists historical relationships and diplomatic ties.The structural barriers so heavily cemented in this nation's core works intentionally as a roadblock often attached to isolation, loneliness, and fear. These factors can and have impacted our success and stories, but we fight against them and refuse to let them alter our reason for migrating.

# Calls to Action

During Litia and I's Talanoa session, we envisioned the type of services or support she felt would have benefited her and her family's integration into the country and she boldly stated that representative mentorship would have added significant positive outcomes to their upbringing here in the U.S. As a mother to three children, she still believes that this type of representative mentorship will still benefit our Pasifika youth, and encourage them to seek higher education.

Direct calls to action include changes to government agencies. Representation matters! Our important educational years occur from grades K-12. When Pasifika youth start seeing teachers and faculty who look like their parents and leaders, they will be more comfortable with expressing their views that often clash with Western views upheld in the U.S. educational system. Data from the Center for American Progress (CAP) 20 informs that "Pacific Islander educators comprise less than 0.5 percent of U.S. teachers and school principals; while this number reflects their representation within the student population, Pacific Islanders have also seen some of the largest enrollment declines in teacher preparation programs." I agree with a policy recommendation drafted by Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) that calls for promoting and supporting recruitment and professional development of a diverse multicultural and multilingual teacher workforce that reflects and represents student demographics, found under Title II of the Higher Education Act. As we think of diverse recruitment, it is important to restructure recruitment practices and methods as they currently reflect a more Western approach further ignoring interested Pasifika applicants who are re-grounding themselves in their cultural practices.

A second call to action are changes to laws and policies. Policymakers should acknowledge Pasifika communities as distinct communities needing specific policies and laws. EPIC's policy recommendation stating the need to advocate for greater

support for AA and NHPI students includes: Ensuring that schools have the capacity to serve these students by including high quality data. A meaningful way to engage Pasifika youth is by encouraging and supporting the inclusion of AA and NHPI history, cultures, literature, and languages in school curricula at all levels.

An important element in garnering support from elected officials and understanding their political will is having a structured plan, and one that identifies a clear financial component. With financial support from earmarking existing fund streams, a growing number of youth-centered programs across the state have found success in implementing programs and policies that aim to support youth programming. Available funds could support Pasifika youth and sustain service programs. EPIC champions the need to fully fund Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Higher Education Act (HEA) programs designed to meet the needs of minority, disadvantaged, non-traditional, and AA and NHPI students, especially programs serving ELL students. Secure sustainable funding for PI serving organizations and agencies. The continuation and sustainability of these services are proven to be helpful especially as we read earlier that about 10% of Pasifika people aged 25 and over do not have a high school diploma. There are many reasons why this group experienced this outcome that underlines how these educational support services are extremely crucial in developing a child's educational growth.

What I took away from this opportunity and being hosted by Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) is the reminder that as Pasifika people, we owe it to each other to create space for those who are coming behind us. Some of us were passed down teachings from wise elders in our communities who will not be there to see the newer generation rise. It is our duty as people across Moananuiākea to stand by and stand for each other. Our connection to Moananuiākea keeps us grounded and centered in our culture and traditions.

"The stories of our ancestors are not simply tales of the past; they are a guide for the present and a roadmap for the future. Our strength lies in our unity. We must come together, across tribal lines and boundaries, to fight for our collective rights."

- *From A Native Daughter* by Haunani Kay Trask