

## Unit 33: Tonga: A new form of Culture Contact

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Both continuity and change in Tongan affairs were revealed during the World War II. Cultural changes had occurred over the preceding hundred years in Tonga, but it had been adaptation, rather than a case of loss and replacement.

As a result of exposure to Western culture, Tongans have rejected some aspects of their own culture, both voluntarily and in-voluntarily. In doing so, they adopted new ideas and values, and technology from the West. These two processes – of adaptation and adoption – took place alongside each other and often overlapped. For example, Western-style clothing was combined with traditional island styles.

Starting in 1943, the presence of more than 9000 American soldiers did not significantly affect the customary social affairs of Tonga. But World War II did have some important economic implications. American forces increased the population of Tongatapu by more than fifty per cent. The presence of servicemen willing to freely spend US dollars created a demand for services, and at high rates compared to before the war. The historian Ian Campbell stated, “The first few months of American occupation were a time of frantic activity, combined with wonderful economic opportunities”.

Indeed, the demand for labour and locally grown food was enormous. Hundreds of men were needed for unloading ships and for general labouring work around the military camps. Prices and wages both jumped. For example, before the war unskilled labour was paid about 25 cents (\$US) per day; during the War, unskilled labourers were paid more than one US dollar per hour.

Many Tongan men were willing to abandon their farms to work for such high wages. Increased prices for fruit and vegetables supplied to the army bases also created opportunities for the farmers as well.

There was also considerable improvement in the health services, because keeping the US soldiers healthy was also a means of keeping Tongans healthy. For example, the Americans introduced a preventative program for venereal disease. Tongan authorities would have been more likely to punish those with the disease rather than provide treatment. Contraceptives were also introduced to minimise the number of children born outside of marriage. (Despite this, many Tongan-American babies were visible after the war).

The sudden and intensive contact between two peoples from vastly different cultures created new problems. There was friction between Tongans and Americans, but also within the Tongan community, due to the different reactions by people of different generations.

For many the foreigners were a threat to cherished Tongan customs and way of life. For example, following the arrival of the American soldiers, Tonga's Queen Salote instructed her people – especially young women – to withdraw to remote parts of the island or even to other islands. On the other hand, young men and women saw that time as one of opportunity for excitement and unprecedented prosperity. It can be said that the Second World War caused conflicting and complex responses among Tongans.