

Tok Blong Pasifik

News and Views from the Pacific Islands

Volume 6, Issue 3



Fa'afafine The “third gender”

Climate Change at the UNPFII

One Wave Festival

Modern Courtship in West Papua

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Pacific Peoples' Partnership

Established in 1975, Pacific Peoples' Partnership is a unique non-governmental, non-profit organization working with communities and organizations in the South and North Pacific to support shared aspirations for peace, cultural integrity, social justice, human dignity, and environmental sustainability by:

- Promoting increased understanding among Canadians on issues of importance to the people of the Pacific islands.
- Advocating for social, political, and economic policy change at all levels.
- Fostering the development of sustainable communities in the Pacific.
- Facilitating links between indigenous peoples of the Pacific islands and Aboriginal peoples of Canada.
- Strengthening relations between Canadian and Pacific island communities and civil society organizations.

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Fa'afafine

The Pacific's "third gender"

This issue of Tok Blong Pasifik traces its genesis to an April 2006 email we received from Shigeyuki Kihara, a Samoan artist who divides her time between Samoa and Auckland. Shigeyuki had been browsing through our website, where she found articles recognizing the struggles and achievements of Pacific woman and youth. What she didn't find was acknowledgement of the existence of *Fa'afafine* communities in the Pacific.

Fa'afafine (pronounced fah-ah-fuh-fee-nay) means "like a woman" in Samoan. The word refers to a vibrant community of people born male but seen by themselves and their community as females embodying the best traits of both genders. *Fa'afafine* do not fit into the typical western conventions of gender and sexuality, thus are sometimes referred to as 'third gender' by western academia.

There's disagreement about the origins of *Fa'afafine*, but evidence suggests their presence in Samoa dates back to at least the 19th century, although community members and some anthropologists believe they have been an integral part of Samoan and other Pacific island cultures for much longer.

As a member of the *Fa'afafine* community, Shigeyuki was curious to know whether PPP had any resources or programming that specifically addressed the concerns of her community. She pointed out that many *Fa'afafine* throughout the South Pacific are unable to achieve recognition or have their voices heard due to lingering racism and homophobia that can be traced to western conceptions of gender normality imposed by the missionaries and the colonial governments that followed.

In this issue we also pay a visit Manokwari, West Papua where modern and traditional values combine to reinforce a conservative approach to gender relations. Evolving practices of courtship and romance among young people represent profound social changes in traditional Papuan societies



Fa'afafine: in the manner of a woman,
Shigeyuki Kihara
Courtesy of Shigeyuki Kihara and the Sherman Galleries, Sydney

Born a boy in Samoa, Living as a woman in Alaska

By Julia O'Malley

“What are you?” The question came from a young woman across the University of Alaska at Anchorage’s computer lab. “Are you a boy or a girl?”

Once again, Tafilisaunoa Alicia Toleafoa had to explain the contradiction of her long, thick hair, plump, glossy lips with the masculine tenor of her voice and tall, substantial body. She told the girl that, she isn’t a boy, or a girl, but something else. “I’m *Fa’afafine*. I have a boy’s body, but I was raised in Samoa as a girl.”

Tafi could also have explained that in the islands, a mother with a *Fa’afafine* among her children is considered lucky. *Fa’afafine* help with babies and cooking, they tend the elderly and the sick. The girl didn’t want to know more. She picked up her things and left, giving Tafi one last look.

For most Americans, gender breaks down simply: There are men and there are women. But across the Pacific Islands, many cultures recognize a third gender displaying both male and female characteristics. In Samoa they are called *Fa’afafine* “like a woman” or, less commonly, *fa’atama*, “like a man.”

In Samoa Tafi was accepted, but life was still complicated. *Fa’afafine*, especially in Christian families, must follow strict social rules. They are expected to remain celibate. In a culture that prizes both its traditions and Christianity, *Fa’afafine* are tolerated, but homosexuality is not. Still, many *Fa’afafine*, who see themselves as women, do have discreet relationships with men.

In her ideal world, Tafi, who was raised as a girl-child named Alicia, wouldn’t have to rearrange her outside to make people accept what she is inside: a straight woman who is attracted to straight men. But the world isn’t ideal. Since coming to Anchorage, Tafi’s family, who loves her as she is, has still pressured her to dress like a man, deciding she needs to fit in to avoid ugliness she isn’t used to.

At 23, she’s torn between the expectations of her family who accept her, and American culture that’s less accepting but offers her what she wants most: a chance to become physically female, to find a husband and have a family of her own.

Samoa is a traditional, communal society. Samoan parents hold a powerful role and commonly influence their children’s decisions far into adulthood. Children don’t choose to become *Fa’afafine*; their mothers decide for them. At 5, Tafi, a sweet, outspoken child, began hoisting babies on her hip, filling bottles for her mother and helping with the dishes. Ropeta, a mother of eight, welcomed Tafi’s help.

Tafi wasn’t encouraged to dress like a girl, but gravitated toward her sisters’ clothing, playing dress-up in private. “I loved skirts, short skirts,” she said.

“For most Americans, gender breaks down simply: There are men and there are women...”

At school Tafi bonded with girls and other *Fa’afafine* among her classmates and teachers. By third grade, most everyone called her Alicia. Her younger siblings, all girls, saw her as an oldest sister.

Tafi’s father, Saunoa “Noah” is a religious man, an elder in the Seventh Day Adventist church whose missionaries brought Western ideas about gender to the islands. Noah had *Fa’afafine* in his own family, but wanted Tafi to be like her brothers. “A boy dressing as a girl is not what God intended,” he says. He’s tried forcing her to change, but nothing worked. Tafi couldn’t be forced.

By the time Tafi reached her teens, the idea of a sex change consumed her. There are many examples of adult *Fa’afafine* who had undergone surgery.

Out of respect for her father, Tafi began to dress less feminine and more androgynous, wearing women’s pants, with T-shirts, her long hair pulled into a bun. Her one indulgence was glitter. “Lots of glitter,” she said. “I loved shiny stuff.” Ropeta and her daughters insulated Tafi from her father’s disapproval, which gradually waned. For junior prom, Ropeta saved two paychecks to buy Tafi the material to make a pink dress.

By 2002, the Toleafoas had immigrated to Anchorage, following family and the promise of better jobs. Tafi stayed behind, her status complicated because she was born in western Samoa, an independent country, separate from the U.S. territory of American Samoa.

In 2005, finally on her way to the University of Alaska, Tafi took her first step on U.S. soil in Hawaii, wearing platform sandals and short-shorts. She always imagined Americans, with their gay celebrities and liberal attitudes, would accept her. She remembered RuPaul and the movie "To Wong Fu, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar," a drag queen comedy she'd watched in high school. "I thought, 'OK if there's people like that, then probably I don't have to explain myself.'"

When she showed her passport, which indicated she was a man, customs officials singled her out for two special searches. She felt disapproval of strangers for the first time. The collapse of her expectations continued in Anchorage. The first day of her liberal studies class, she heard whispers. Her voice betrayed her. "When they look at your face and you have earrings on and you have make-up on and you have long hair, then automatically you're supposed to have this kind of voice," she said. "If not, then you are kind of like an alien or something."

After two weeks, Tafi's father sat her down. Concerned about her safety he advised her to change her style. He told her about *Fa'afafine* from his mother's family who had gone to California some 10 years before. People didn't know what to make of her. Tragically she was beaten to death. and thrown through a window at a party.

This meant no more short-shorts or glitter for Tafi. Instead, it's T-shirts and slacks. If asked about pronouns, she'd now refer to herself as "he." But, even in toned

down-outfits, Tafi seemed feminine. "Even the most inclusive people do not know how to talk about a person that is both male and female."

Tafi took judgment as a challenge. She didn't want to hide. She excelled in class, tackling complicated literature, winning a seat on the student senate, making a loyal group of friends in the school Polynesian association. She began to see it as her mission to inform the campus about *Fa'afafine*. Along with Professor Ann Jache, Tafi crafted a project about *Fa'afafine* over the generations. She gave presentations on campus, then at a Unitarian church. Growing more confident with each appearance.



Fa'afafine performance at Pasifika in Auckland
Photo by John Conery 2007

Tafi's Anchorage home is crowded with parents, brothers, sisters, nieces and in-laws, 13 in all. Tropical flowers decorate the walls and a grass mats cover the carpet. Among her sisters, she's Alicia, a dutiful oldest daughter with a flower behind her ear, chasing her toddling niece, carrying dishes from the kitchen.

Tafi's brothers and sisters have a better idea than her parents about how Americans view her. They know that some people with a

sibling like her would feel ashamed. Her brothers, who see her alternately as a sister and a cross-dressing brother, defend her fiercely. "Samoa culture believes that God gave you a freedom of choice, you are who you are and it doesn't matter," said her brother, Asosaotama, a security guard who goes by "Ace."

"Shame is nothing when it comes down to blood," said her brother Seven, a soldier at Fort Richardson. "Blood is blood." But for her father and her brothers, one thing is very important. Tafi must follow the rules. A *Fa'afafine* brother is one thing, but a gay brother is quite another.

In Samoa, *Fa'afafine* occasionally have relationships with

Born a boy in Samoa *Continued from page 4*

men, but rarely, if ever, in public. Older Fa'afafine, whose parents have died, might live like closeted gay men, pretending their partner is a platonic friend. More commonly Fa'afafine live with a large family, getting by with short, secret relationships with straight men who may later marry women, leaving their Fa'afafine lover broken hearted.

When the subject of a boyfriend came up, Tafi's mother and sisters cheered with approval. Her brother shook his head. "Tafi can act like a girl, dress up like a girl, but if he had a boyfriend, that's going too far," said Seven.

If anything makes Tafi unhappy, it's this. Growing up she thought she'd be like other Fa'afafine, staying with her aging parents until they passed away, caring for her sister Narese, who has Down's syndrome. But since coming to America, she has dreamed of a future more like her sisters, with a partner of her own.

She contemplates taking hormones and eventually getting surgery to make her body match the way she feels. Her mother and sisters would understand. Her father and brothers would eventually accept it. But even then, if she chose to have a relationship with a man, she would be breaking the rules. She would have to keep it from them. "Everything else is okay," she said. "But, boyfriend? No."

On a Saturday morning at Anchorage Community Seventh Day Adventist church the youth choir lines up. Tafi's sisters Sina and Cherish clap and sing "This little light of mine" in their aloha-print dresses, their long hair in heavy buns, glittery gloss on their lips.

Outside of family, church is the most important thing for Tafi. But it's also a place where she feels conflicted. At first the family attended a mostly Samoan congregation who understood her, but when they moved to a mixed-race church, things changed. Once again, Tafi's father asked her

to dress like a man.

Their Pastor, who is from Antigua, has watched his congregation grow increasingly diverse over 20 years with American blacks, Africans, Caribbean and the Pacific Islanders. Tafi and other Fa'afafine have raised troublesome questions. "I've had to defend him," he said. "I've been accused of encouraging or upholding his unbiblical behavior." But, he said, all people are sinners and Jesus welcomed everyone, even prostitutes and criminals. So long as Tafi isn't influencing children, there is a place for him. It would be a very different matter if Tafi were in a relationship with a man. Then, he would have to intervene.

“...there had been four Fa'afafine in Noah's mother's family, one of whom had gone to California 10 years before. People didn't know what to make of her. She was beaten to death and thrown through a window at a party...”

Tafi has made her peace with Jesus. "I don't think God sent his son for perfect people" she said. "Jesus came to wash away everyone's sins. Not just straight people's sins."

Away from church and school Tafi feels most like herself among the women of her family.

On a sunny day in June, her family threw a barbecue for a hundred guests. In her sarong, with a flower behind her ear, Tafi carried plates of food to elders, she dished out salad she sliced the elaborate cake. A child fell; she picked him up and shushed his tears.

Meanwhile R&B poured out of big speakers and the rhythm took hold of her sisters. They stopped work to dance, raising palms to the sky. The mood captured their mother, who bounced and swayed. Tafi put down her big spoon and let the song catch her hips in a slow groove. Sisters hooted. Aunties cracked up. Ropeta looked at her happy child dancing in the barbecue smoke and cheered her on in English: "Go girl! Go girl! Go girl!"

This story is adapted from an article, which originally appeared in The Anchorage Daily News

***Fa'afafine* today are generally accepted in the Pacific, but Christianity and continuing western influence have complicated their social position...**

Fa'afafine aren't like transgendered people in America and elsewhere. They don't identify themselves as women in men's bodies. They are identified as children by mothers or other females close to their family, a decision influenced by their behavior, and possibly by a lack of girls in a family to do "women's work."

Because they aren't likely to have children of their own, *Fa'afafine* often excel professionally and many become teachers. They commonly live with their extended family and care for their aging parents. They are seen as excellent housekeepers and babysitters.

Sexuality for *Fa'afafine* is complicated. Many see themselves as women and enter into clandestine, short-term relationships with men who see themselves as straight. Some *Fa'afafine*, motivated by social pressure and the wish for children, leave their feminine identity behind and marry women, but many others don't. Occasionally they live openly with male partners.

Depending on where they live and the expectations of their family, they express their gender differently. In cities, some *Fa'afafine* live more openly, dressing flamboyantly, performing in American-style drag shows, having public relationships. In more remote places, and in Christian families, *Fa'afafine* are generally expected to be more discreet, maintaining at least a public image of celibacy.

Some of the recent generation of *Fa'afafine*, most influenced by Western culture, have begun experimenting with physically changing their sex, taking hormones obtained from doctors or on the black market, and in rare cases, traveling to the U.S. or Asia for gender reassignment surgery.

Excerpted from The Anchorage Daily News Sources: Assistant Professor Ann Jache, University of Alaska Anchorage; "Paradise Lost? Social Change and Fa'afafine in Samoa," by Dr. Johanna Schmidt; "Male Transvestism and Cultural Change in Samoa," by Jeannette Mageo and Tafi Toleafoa.



The popularity of *Fa'afafine* boxing means they feature prominently in the November 2008 Pro-Am boxing Fight Night in Auckland, part of a six tournament circuit across Australasia and the Pacific.

www.eventpolynesia.com

***Fa'afafine*; in a manner of a woman**

In old Samoa, *faleaitu* (house of spirits) was theatre performed by men presenting political satire in skits in front of the chiefs. The men of *faleaitu* were respected as entertainers and simultaneously served as social commentators to the wider community.

It is the ancient practice of *faleaitu* which led Shigeyuki Kihara to create her 2005 body of work entitled ***Fa'afafine; in a manner of a woman***, a series of photographic self portraits where she disguises herself to portray a Samoan man, a woman, and a married couple. These works pay homage to Kihara's ancestors and to simultaneously subvert the dominant western heterosexual "normalcy" that continues to conflict with the existence of *Fa'afafine* people today.

Shigeyuki Kihara's double portrait of a married couple complicates all our expectations of human gender. Here, the artist shows herself as a man and as a woman, in the role of a married couple. The traditional wedding photograph is transformed into a visual exploration of sexuality and the nature of male to female relationships.



Ulugali'i Samoa
Shigeyuki Kihara

'Shigeyuki Kihara: Living Photographs' Solo Exhibition October 7, 2008 – February 1, 2009

This installation uses photography to explore themes of Pacific culture, identity, colonialism, indigenous spirituality, stereotypes, gender roles, and consumerism. The inspiration comes from a variety of sources, including 19th- and early 20th-century photographs that contributed to ideas – some imagined – about life in the Pacific Islands.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Lila Acheson Wallace Wing, 1st floor
1000 Fifth Avenue. New York, New York 10028, USA

The exhibition is made possible by the Friends of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

www.metmuseum.org

The Seventh Session of The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, April, 2008

By Stephanie Peter

At the invitation of Pacific Peoples' Partnership I attended the Seventh United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York City in April 2008. This year's special theme was "Climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges." As the outgoing Coordinator of *Shifting Tides: Indigenous Responses to Global Climate Change*, the forum provided me with an opportunity network as well as to gain insights into climate change mitigation and adaptation work being done by Indigenous communities around the world.

The programme included interventions from Indigenous peoples, States, UN Agencies, Multilateral Organizations, NGOs and the private sector. Side events provided an opportunity for information sharing, dialogue, and networking. I regret not knowing about this when I developed the *Shifting Tides* programme because the UNPFII would have provided an excellent venue for our panel. Perhaps PPP will be able to include this in future projects.

As we become more aware of climate change through media, scientific reports, political platforms and the "green" shifts by industry, it is important to consider the impact new policies will have on Indigenous communities. Biodiesel is currently being touted as a green alternative in developed countries but people in developing countries are negatively impacted by the shift from food production for local consumption to biodiesel production for export. (An example is logging biodiversity rich tropical forests in Papua to convert them to palm oil plantations. Forests that sustained tribal communities for millennia are replaced by monocultures, leaving formerly self-sufficient communities in poverty) As we learned from members of the *Shifting Tides* initiative, food security in the Arctic and South Pacific is being eroded by changing climate.

While living on Rarotonga in 2002-2003 as a participant

in PPP's Indigenous Peoples Abroad Programme I recall discussions with senior colleagues at the National Environment Service where they described being the sole representative from a developing country at

international meetings, sitting next to an "army of suits" from Canada. My experience at the UNPFII was interesting because these "suits" were a distinct minority, overshadowed by a diverse assortment of Indigenous people wearing colourful traditional regalia with beaming pride.

One full afternoon was dedicated to interventions by Small Island Developing States of the Pacific. Their issues would be familiar to our Tok Blong Pasifik readers as they spoke about the devastating impacts climate change is having in their countries.

As a result, the Forum has developed a preliminary agenda for next year's session along with draft recommendations concerning the inclusion of Indigenous people in the creation and implementation of adaptation and mitigation measures, as well as the need for global negotiations on climate change to respect the rights of Indigenous peoples and their abilities to nurture and develop traditional knowledge. The Forum called on all parties to support, protect and nurture indigenous peoples' natural resource management capacity, environment-friendly technologies, biodiversity and cultural diversity and low-carbon, traditional livelihoods. Importantly, the Forum also called on parties to ensure that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples be implemented while undertaking these processes.

Saleliye'naat Stephanie Peter coordinated Shifting Tides: Indigenous Responses to Global Climate Change. She's a member of the Cowichan First Nation and an alumni of PPP's Indigenous Peoples Abroad Programme





Imagine a winter wave born off the shores of Antarctica, sweeping across the Pacific to be eagerly greeted by wave riders in every corner of our vast ocean. Conceived to showcase Pacific Peoples' Partnership while raising awareness of the impact of climate change and ocean pollution OneWave also celebrated the ancient Polynesian sport of *he'e nalu* (surfing) that has found unique expression in the "Cedar Surf" of Vancouver Island, home to a vibrant and dynamic surfing community that is fiercely proud of its rugged and iconoclastic spirit in the grand tradition of the generations of people who pioneered up and down our coast, and the First Nations communities who preceded them, creating a home along some of the most remote and inhospitable shores of the Pacific.

Three distinct events provided opportunities for talented Vancouver Island artists, designers, musicians, dancers, chefs and comedians to share their creativity in homage to Pacific waves and currents.

"Coastal Perspectives" at Demitasse Café on August 21st presented a diverse collaboration of artists working in a variety of media from graffiti artists transforming recycled skateboard decks to traditional Coast Salish drum-making demonstrations by Jorge Lewis of the *Snuneymuxw* First Nation.

"Heat Wave" in Centennial Square on August 24th promised sun but the wave came in the form of trillions of raindrops that didn't deter people from celebrating the Pacific, sampling tasty tropical treats by Blue Nile and the Reef to the music of Jon Middleton, Jiminy, Animal Nation, Dead Reckoning and Oh! Snap



The Victoria chapter of the **SurfRider Foundation** was on hand to highlight their environmental education and advocacy in coastal zones worldwide.

Reef or Madness? The grande finale on August 28th presented dazzling live art and body painting, fire spinning extravaganzas, innovative contemporary dance and music by Brave New Waves, C.F.C. and Ain't Dead yet. Once again food from the Reef and the Blue Nile joined vegan raw chocolate treats from Chef E.J. of Nosh'in. To quote our brilliant special events coordinator Chandler McMurray-Ives, without whom none of this would have been possible "All "swell" that ends well!"

Our heartfelt thanks to the dozens of dedicated volunteers and sponsors: Industry Images, Vancouver Island Brewery, Frank Whites Dive Store, Independent Media Productions, Sitka Surf, Threesixty Board shop, Smoking Lily, The Boulders Climbing Gym, Sandra Hahlen R.Ac. Jennifer Annais-Pighin, SurfRider Foundation and many more!

Pacific Peoples' Partnership gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of British Columbia through BC 150 Years, a Ministry of Tourism, Sport and the Arts initiative.

Pacific Promises: A Story from the Leaders of Tomorrow

Written by Stephanie Peter and Deyna Marsh, Illustrated by Natalie Christensen

Pacific Peoples' Partnership is proud to announce the launch of our illustrated children's book. Conceived to share some of the learning from the *Shifting Tides: Indigenous Responses to Global Climate Change* consultations in communities from the South Pacific to the Canadian Arctic. The story begins with a message in a bottle set adrift by 11 year old Lilah from Vancouver Island's Cowichan First Nation. Lilah's bottle drifts on ocean currents, washing up on Rarotonga many months later where 11 year old Tia-Moana participating in an Earth Day Beach clean-up. Delighted to find Lilah's message Tia-Moana writes to her and thus begins a lively correspondence where the girls tell each other about their families, communities and cultures in a series of letters and postcards, sharing their hopes and dreams for the future. A common theme is the impact of climate change on the social, cultural and economic well-being of both island communities, one in the South Pacific and the other in the North Pacific.

Pacific Promises is printed on Vancouver Island using 100% post consumer recycled paper and non-toxic vegetable based inks. Copies are available from Pacific Peoples' Partnership for \$20 with all proceeds supporting our climate justice initiatives.

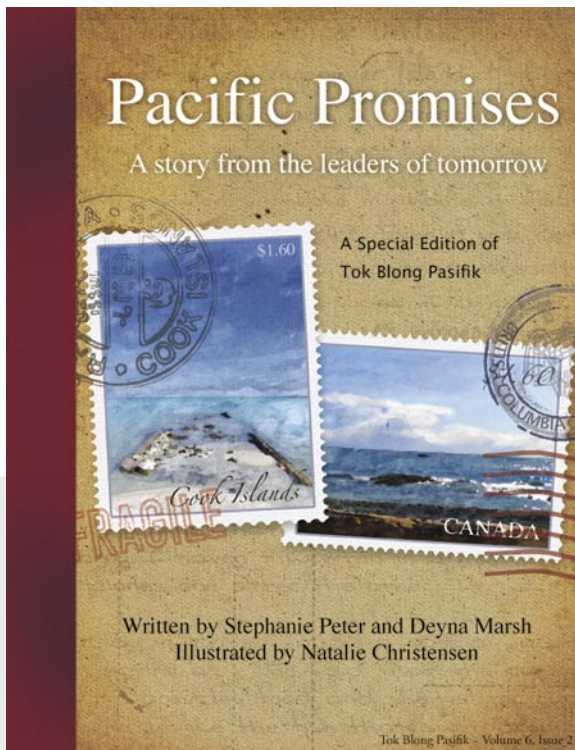
About the authors

Deyna Kiriata Marsh

Deyna was born in New Zealand and raised on Rarotonga, the capital island of the Cook Islands in the South Pacific. Deyna is a self-described "Maori fruit-salad"; her father's ancestors hailed from the New Zealand Maori Tuwharetoa and Ngaphui tribes and her mother's ancestors were from the Cook Islands tribes of Mauke and Rarotonga. Deyna attended the University of the South Pacific in 2001-2003 based at the Fiji Campus where she graduated with a double major in Geography and Land Management. While in Fiji, she spent many weeks in coastal villages around the Fiji Islands and saw first-hand the plight of the people and their vulnerable coastal villages to the effects of climate change. Since completing her degree, Deyna has been working for the Education Unit of the Cook Islands National Environment Service.

When Deyna is not busy collating a booklet of children's climate change poems (*purua*) or developing

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New norms of love and marriage alter the

In Papua, girls like my 17 year-old friend Janet would once have expected to have their marriages arranged by their parents and family. However, things have changed in Papuan society over recent decades, and love and marriage are no exceptions. This is not to say material considerations no longer play a part in selecting a spouse, nor that romantic love was in the past unknown in Papua. But young Papuans such as Janet now expect to form their own marriages based on love, or at least on attraction, in a way that did not happen before.

In some areas, such as the highland town of Wamena, the demand to choose one's own partner is still very new. In others, such as Manokwari in the Bird's Head region, love-marriage is already regarded as 'traditional'. The impact of this 'modern love' is most keenly felt in larger Papuan towns, where beauty salons increasingly hire out white wedding gowns to Papuan brides to wear to their Victorian-style white weddings. The sale of love magic on the streets of urban centres also responds to the new interest in romance, even though it is a duplicitous way to make someone fall in love.

Learning to love

The importance of Christianity in the lives, worldviews and relationships of most Papuans cannot be overstated. Most Papuans see love-made marriage as an integral part of being Christian. They may or may not love more than

one wife, and they may or may not take other traditional perspectives on marriage, but the linking of love and marriage is remarkably similar across Papua.

A less documented but powerful influence that is changing Papuan attitudes towards love is the media: television shows, movies, karaoke clips and magazine articles. Romantic themes are central to many media productions

and are consistently used in advertising, which uses the pleasure and satisfaction that love promises to promote the consumption of commodities. Papuans today enjoy Indian and western films, Javanese and Mexican soap operas, and Ambonese or Papuan ka-

raoke clips. Their different aesthetics give Papuans new ways of relating and feeling. And even in the remotest villages, magazines with articles about 'how to rekindle romance' circulate.

Confronting tradition

The impact of the media couldn't be clearer in how young Papuans talk about love. As my friend Janet told me, 'When I like someone I let them know by giving them a card on Valentine's Day. If they send one back I am overjoyed, you know like that girl in the film Titanic.' But when young Papuans like Janet pursue romance, they come face to face with the dominant conservative sexual ethos in



Jayapura youth on the frontlines of a social transformation
Photo by Sarah Hewat

rules for Papuan youth by Sarah Hewat

Papua. It may be modern and Christian to marry for love, but the process of building intimacy with a potential spouse reeks of sexual immorality. As a result, getting to know a member of the opposite sex is a dangerous process that leaves people vulnerable to gossip and other punishments.

Across Papua, the institutions of church and state are united in their message that the only good sex is sex within marriage. This ideology of 'saving yourself' dovetails with the message sent by adat (customary) leaders that the obedience and chastity of Papuan youth is a foundation of ethnic integrity. Young people who transgress these sexual boundaries risk being subjected to traditional retributive justice. For most of Papua, adat is synonymous with the bride-price economy, where 'free' sex is most definitely bad management practice. In a nutshell, bride-price assumes that female sexuality and reproductive are clan-based resources, not individual ones. When a man's family pays bride-price, the rights to his wife's reproductivity are transferred to him. The offspring of their union are incorporated into his clan. In theory, at least, any sexual activity outside these relationships amounts to a kind of theft, deserving of compensation.

Secret affairs

In practice, cunning and luck are more likely to determine the fate of illicit sexual relations than any set of rules. But given the anxiety around pre-marital sex, the only socially legitimate form of courtship remains that which is public, sexless, and morphs hastily into marriage. The ideal partner is of a similar age to you, is Christian, and has graduated from high school or university. He should have a job or, at least be industrious. As these ideals are impossibly high for many Papuans, 'suka sama suka' (mutual attraction) relationships are frequently formed in secret. But these kinds of liaisons are definitely dangerous, especially for women.

Affairs are usually exposed through pregnancy, and the

implications of a 'shotgun wedding' are very much alive in Papua. In adat courts, the ideal outcome is usually to see the girl wed and the man accused pay a fine as well as bridewealth. But a daughter's untimely pregnancy can be economically disadvantageous for her and her family in two ways. Firstly, her more desperate status lowers her bargaining position in bridewealth negotiations. Secondly, pregnancy is likely to force her to leave school, which damages her chances of finding secure work and future economic security.

In Manokwari at least, when young women contemplate having a secret affair, their greatest fear is not that they will be labelled a sinner. Nor do they tend to fear sabotaging their economic security by falling pregnant, or becoming infected with HIV. Rather, the greatest fear associated with hiding romantic relationships is that, if exposed, great shame will fall upon their parents.

Heartache either way

For many couples whose union would not be approved because one or both spouses do not meet family standards, 'shotgun weddings' work in their favour. Yet even if the couple start their marriage in love, the pressures of living with the husband's family – which a combination of poverty and tradition makes a common practice in Papua – can erode newlyweds' amorous feelings. I have met many unhappy households where an unchosen daughter-in-law is said to have brought disharmony to the household due to her ill-temper or laziness.

On the girl's part, moving into an unsupportive household can affect her well-being, especially if that household is far away from her own family. The norm of following a husband (ikut suami) refers not only to his family home but also to his religion. When attraction leads a Christian woman to marry a Muslim, or even a man from another Christian denomination, it can cause considerable emotional pain since it typically means she will depart from

“...the only socially legitimate form of courtship is that which is public, sexless, and morphs hastily into marriage...”

New norms of love and marriage

Continued from page 12

the family church, an institution central to the identity and spiritual passion of most Papuans.

Marriages contracted by the spouses themselves can also lead to other heartaches that were less likely in a time when kin arranged marriages. Women traditionally move to their spouses' villages, but in the past this rarely meant going far away. Now they choose their spouses from a pool that includes men from other parts of Indonesia, and even further afield. As a result, distance can make it harder than ever for wives to maintain relationships with their families.

Like women everywhere, Papuan women face the possibility that a charming boyfriend can become a nightmare husband. When women hold out hope for more egalitarian and respectful relationships, the revelation that lovers are in fact liabilities, spending the family income on gambling, sex workers and alcohol, only intensifies their disappointment.

Emotional transformations taking place in Papua are as dramatic as any in the socio-political and cultural realms. New understandings of love, new expectations of gender relations and new experiences of romantic passion have inevitably accompanied the more documented changes associated with modernisation. For my friend Janet and her peers, pressure to conform to highly conservative moral expectations, as espoused by representatives of church, state and adat, all too often clash with youthful desires for romantic adventure and intimacy. And even when young women negotiate this cultural clash and successfully wed their beloved, new obstacles arising from economic hardship can conspire to dash their hopes of living happily ever after.

Sarah Hewat is completing her PhD at Melbourne University. She is currently writing her thesis on romantic courtship amongst Papuan youth in Manokwari.

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environmental education materials, she brings her daughter, Tia-Moana, to Cook Islands dance class.

Stephanie Peter

Stephanie belongs to Cowichan Tribes with ancestry from several Coast Salish communities on Vancouver Island including Songhees and Tsartlip. She holds the ancestral name of *Saleliye'naat*. In 2002, Stephanie was sent by Pacific Peoples' Partnership to participate in a six-month internship with the Cook Islands National Environment Service in Rarotonga where she met her friend, Deyna Marsh. Upon her return from the South Pacific, Stephanie completed a degree from the University of Victoria with a double major in Anthropology and Geography. Since then Stephanie has balanced the demands of working for her community on environmental and cultural initiatives that promote sustainable development and language revitalization and raising two daughters, Natalie and Olivia. Inspired by her family, Stephanie co-authored, **Sara's Sunflower**, a children's storybook about sharing and protecting special places in 2006 and she is currently recording a collection of original children's songs in *Hul'q'umi'num'*, the language spoken in Cowichan.

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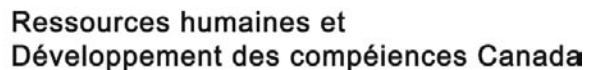
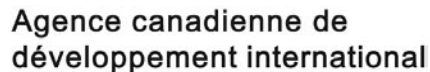
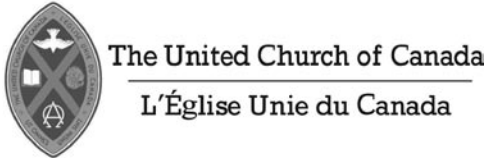
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