



Tongan-American dancers perform a native dance at East Palo Alto City Park as a way of keeping in touch with the

culture they left on their islands when they moved to the Peninsula.

Times Tribune staff photo by Kathryn Uzzardo

Tongans are learning and remembering

By Bob Cohn
Times Tribune staff

Every Friday, Lavinia Finau-Leger walks to the telex machine in the corner of her living room to get the latest news from her homeland. Every Saturday, just before noon, she drives to the KFX radio studio in San Francisco and delivers the information to Bay Area listeners.

For thousands of Peninsula residents, this is one way they stay in

touch with their native Tonga, a series of South Pacific islands approximately 1,300 miles northeast of New Zealand.

When Finau-Leger is not preparing her radio show, she acts as an import-export broker of Tongan foods and wares for Peninsula businesses. This way, she says, she can provide the Tongan people with a taste of what life is like back home.

Finau-Leger, while trying to help Tongans accept the U.S. culture,

also tries to remind them of their roots.

Assimilating into a new culture while trying to preserve the old is a daily struggle for the more than 3,000 Tongans in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Tongans began arriving on the Peninsula more than 20 years ago, leaving a poor, undereducated homeland for what they hoped would be the land of opportunity. That population has swelled over the years as prosperous economic

conditions continue to attract the islanders.

Tongans here say they came for better jobs, health care, education and a higher standard of living.

Besides the Bay Area, Tongan communities have sprouted in Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Hawaii and parts of Texas.

Finau-Leger said she came to the United States five years ago "for

Please see TONGANS, B-7



Times Tribune staff photo by Bob Andres

Lavinia Finau-Leger keeps her fellow Tongans informed of the happenings in their native land through use of a telex machine in her home and a microphone at a Bay Area radio station.

PTT. 8-12-84

TONGANS

Continued from B-1

personal reasons. I saw chances and opportunities for myself."

Opportunity is the driving force behind Tongan immigration to the Peninsula. And while most Tongans here are pleased with the seemingly limitless economic potential, few have been unsuccessful or are as well educated as Finau-Leger.

Most of the Tongans in the Bay Area make their living doing yard work, gardening and landscaping for the multiacre landowners. Because subsistence farming is the way of life on the island, many arrive here with a love for the land — and often little else.

"Back on the island, people worked on the land," said Eveline Koloto, a Tongan living in East Palo Alto. "It's something that's indigenous to the culture. They brought it from home."

Tongan-written notes or Tongan calling cards offering yard-work service dominate bulletin boards in grocery stores.

Finau Happy's bright green calling card advertises a gardener who will remove trees and haul concrete. In the upper-left corner is a little pine tree; in the upper right, a cross, symbolizing the Tongan commitment to the church.

Happy has been doing this type of work for five years, and he says the money is better here than in Tonga. He works at houses in Menlo Park, Palo Alto and San Carlos.

Many Tongans look to the church, with the rituals and customs of the old culture, to balance their day-to-day "Americanization." The English introduced Methodism to the Tongans' islands years ago, and church services are often festive events featuring native singing and dancing, as well as serious study of the Scriptures.

"It (the singing and dancing) reminds them of their commonness as Tongans," Finau-Leger said.

The church also acts as a meeting place for members of the Tongan community; in addition to Sunday services, many Tongan churches hold youth programs and social functions during the week.

Tongans say that the church is only one facet of their unified, close-knit group.

"There is this overriding sense of unity that keeps the family and the community together," Finau-Leger said.

Part of this stems from the family togetherness that the Tongans brought here from the islands. The extended family is the basic living unit, and it is not uncommon to see several generations of Tongans in the same home. This closeness is

important to Tongans just arriving in the United States, as they are welcome to live with friends or relatives until they can afford life on their own.

This, Koloto said, is why many Tongans have left the San Mateo area for East Palo Alto.

"Here in East Palo Alto, you can rent a house for \$600 and fit everybody," as opposed to paying \$400 for a cramped apartment, she said.

"The family tie is very strong, and they don't like to break it up. Often, several families will decide to join together and get a home in East Palo Alto," Koloto said.

Koloto herself plays a big part in keeping East Palo Alto Tongans close together.

Koloto, a former teacher with a master's degree, is working on her doctorate degree in education at Stanford University. She also is leading a drive to educate Tongans about things such as driver's license tests, job interviews, income-tax returns and the public-school system.

Koloto, through the Pacific Tongan Community Organization, also teaches old Tongan customs to young Tongans born in the United States. Twice a week she works with a group of dancers in her home.

In a move symbolizing friendship and cooperation between the U.S. and Tongan cultures, Koloto recently presented East Palo Alto Mayor Barbara Mouton with Tongan beads and a tapa cloth.

Other Peninsula cities have similar Tongan self-help agencies.

In Burlingame, the Talakeioloa shows Tongans the proper channels for action in the city and provides funds for needy Tongan families.

The Tongan American Society performs a similar function in the Foster City area.

"People feel lost and they do need somebody to take them by the hand to the proper person," Finau-Leger said.

While most Tongans eventually adapt to the U.S. lifestyle, they are careful to preserve certain native customs. This, however, can pose problems.

For example, U.S. neighbors often complain that Tongan gatherings are too noisy.

"The Americans don't like loud things," said Nancy Wong, a Tongan living in San Carlos. "We are open and like to lend a hand to each other. But some of the Americans are very isolated. They're private."

Tongans like to throw big parties to mark birthdays, weddings, luaus and funerals, and the singing and dancing create a festive, if wild, atmosphere.

Another problem involves the use of underground ovens, a Tongan custom that allows hundreds of



Times Tribune staff photos by Kathryn Uzzardo

While Viliami Takaua plays the banjo (above), a Tongan performs a native dance at a party in East Palo Alto.

people to be fed at one time. By surrounding a pig or other delicacy with hot rocks and burying it in the ground, Tongan cooks create an insulated oven.

But fire officials say they also create a fire hazard.

The language barrier also causes some tension and anxiety among Tongans and Americans. Wong said Tongans lose job opportunities because they cannot converse well enough with prospective employers.

Koloto intervenes in school disciplinary problems involving Tongan students who cannot communicate with teachers and other students. Communication problems often result in students dropping out of high school, she said.

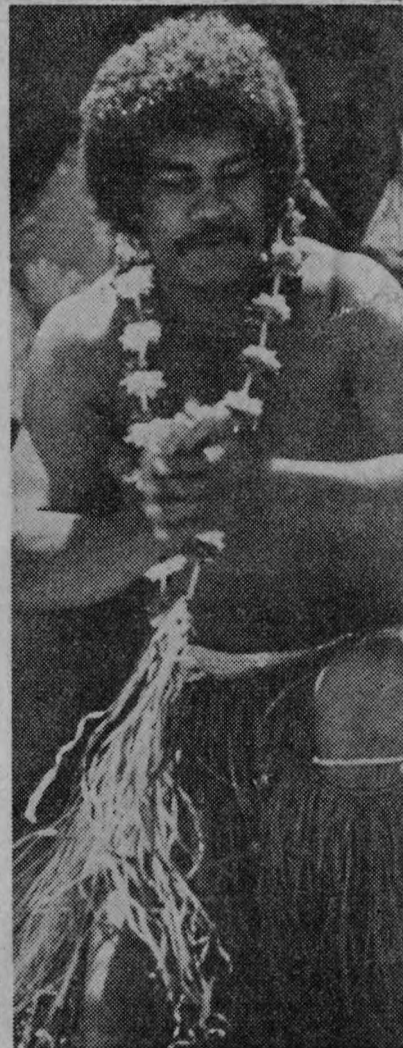
Communication is an especially severe problem for Tongans who came here as adults and never learned English in grade school.

"They can't really make the adjustment because they can't master the language," Koloto said.

Also, Tongan leaders often have to wrestle with city officials to secure community space.

Finau-Leger has asked the mayor of San Mateo for some public land where Tongans could dig underground ovens. Koloto said the Tongans of East Palo Alto would like a community center. The Tongan American Society is waiting for conditional-use permits from Foster City so that it can run bingo games at night to raise funds. Officials of the society also have requested meeting space.

As Tongans struggle to adjust to a new way of life, they cling to some of their old customs. They still look to their island king and queen for



guidance. They shop at Tongan markets and attend Tongan churches. They celebrate Tongan holidays.

And, each Saturday, they listen to Finau-Leger's radio show for the latest in Tongan news and music.

P.T.T. 8-12-84