

The Cultural Interface Between the Tonga People in Zimbabwe and the Tonga People in the South Pacific

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Abstract: This paper interrogates the cultural interface between the Tonga people of Zimbabwe and their namesakes in the South Pacific, situating the inquiry within debates on identity, place, and comparative ethnography in a globalized world. Despite their geographical disjuncture and divergent historical trajectories, the shared ethnonym “Tonga” invites a critical exploration of how communities construct meaning, resilience, and belonging under distinct ecological and socio-political pressures. The Zimbabwean Tonga, historically displaced by the Kariba Dam project, embody a cultural cosmology anchored in the Zambezi River and articulated through rituals, spiritual practices, and agrarian livelihood strategies. Conversely, the South Pacific Tonga sustain an Oceanic cultural system characterized by hierarchical kinship, ritualized kava ceremonies, and performative arts such as lakalaka, which reinforce notions of continuity, mana, and collective identity

Through a comparative lens, the paper demonstrates that cultural interfaces are not premised on genealogical relatedness but rather on the epistemological utility of juxtaposition. The study argues that examining these Tonga communities side by side reveals how global modernity, displacement, and environmental change generate parallel questions of survival, adaptation, and cultural preservation. Furthermore, it highlights the methodological significance of cross-regional scholarship in deprovincializing African and Pacific studies, foregrounding new possibilities for theorizing culture across non-contiguous spaces.

The paper concludes that the Tonga–Tonga comparison exemplifies the potential of cultural interface studies to extend anthropological thought beyond bounded regional categories. In so doing, it contributes to wider discourses on translocal identity, the politics of naming, and the global circulation of cultural meaning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The study of cultural interfaces in the twenty-first century has assumed increasing salience as globalization, mobility, and intercultural exchanges deepen the entanglement of societies across space and time (Hannerz, U., 1996); (Clifford, J., 1997). In this regard, the comparative exploration of the Tonga people in Zimbabwe and the Tonga of the South Pacific presents a fertile terrain for interrogating how identity, cultural continuity, and adaptation unfold within divergent historical, geographical, and socio-political contexts. Although the two groups share a common ethnonym, their trajectories of cultural formation have been shaped by distinctive forces: the Zimbabwean Tonga, largely situated along the Zambezi River basin, carry a history marked by forced displacement during the construction of the Kariba Dam in the mid-twentieth century (Colson, 2010) (McGregor, J., 2009), while the Tonga of the South Pacific, dispersed across the Polynesian islands, embody a cultural legacy deeply rooted in oceanic navigation, ritual performance, and monarchic traditions (Kaepler, A., 1999) (Helu, I. F., 1999).

This paper situates the Tonga–Tonga interface within broader debates on cultural contact zones and translocal identity formations, (Pratt, M. L., 1991), (Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J., 1992). The comparative dimension is not predicated on genealogical or linguistic connectedness but rather on the heuristic value of juxtaposition: by placing these two communities side by side, the study probes how cultural meanings are negotiated, reinvented, and expressed in relation to ecological environments, religious systems, and socio-political structures. For the Zimbabwean Tonga, rituals surrounding the Nyaminyami river spirit, communal agricultural practices, and oral traditions articulate a cosmology bound to the Zambezi landscape (Fontein, J., 2015) (Colson, 2010). Conversely, the South Pacific Tonga foreground ritual kava ceremonies, stratified kinship networks, and performative cultural expressions such as lakalaka as embodiments of cultural resilience and continuity (Shore, B., 1989) and (Campbell, I.C., 2011).

By critically engaging these sites of cultural production, the paper seeks to illuminate how the Tonga in both Africa and the Pacific articulate belonging and survival

in relation to displacement, ecological challenges, and global modernity. Moreover, it interrogates the epistemological implications of comparative ethnography across non-contiguous spaces, raising questions about the politics of naming, cultural symbolism, and the very notion of "interface" as a site of both convergence and divergence (Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J.L., 2012).

The contribution of this study is therefore twofold: first, it expands comparative cultural studies by drawing attention to seldom-connected groups whose shared ethnonym opens a discursive space for dialogue; and second, it underscores the importance of cross-regional scholarship in deprovincializing African and Pacific studies, situating them within a more expansive global anthropological conversation (Appadurai, A, 1996), (Smith, L. T, 2020). In so doing, the paper advances the argument that cultural interfaces are not merely empirical encounters but also epistemic opportunities to rethink how scholars engage difference, similarity, and global interconnectedness.

➤ *Research Questions*

- What cultural continuities and divergences exist between these two Tonga groups.
- How do History, Geography, and cosmology shape identity?
- What can these interfaces teach about cultural resilience and global indigenous studies.

II. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The methodological orientation of this study is grounded in a comparative ethnographic design, informed by trans local anthropology and postcolonial critique (Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J., 1992), (Smith, L.T, 2020). The central premise is that the cultural interface between the Tonga of Zimbabwe and the Tonga of the South Pacific is not to be read through genealogical or linguistic continuity, but through the epistemological potential of juxtaposition. In line with (Pratt, M. L, 1991), concept of the "contact zone," the methodology interrogates how two distinct cultural formations—situated in divergent socio-historical contexts can be placed in critical dialogue to illuminate broader questions of identity, belonging, and resilience under the pressures of displacement, ecological transformation, and global modernities.

➤ *Research Design*

The study adopts a qualitative, multi-sited comparative approach (Marcus, G.E. , 1995)(Marcus, recognizing the non-contiguous geographies of the two Tonga contexts. Multi-sited ethnography allows for the tracing of cultural meanings across spaces that are not geographically connected yet are analytically brought into relation. The research draws on a wide range of data sources, including existing ethnographies (Colson, E. , 1971) (Kaeppler, A., 1999), historical archives, oral traditions, ritual performances, and secondary analyses of cultural expressions. This approach ensures both depth and breadth, enabling a nuanced account of each community while foregrounding the analytical interface between them.

➤ *Data Sources and Techniques*

Given the impossibility of conducting fieldwork across both sites simultaneously for this specific study, the methodology relies on documentary ethnography (Atkinson, P., & Coffey, A., 2011), textual analysis of existing anthropological accounts, and critical rereading of archival and oral sources. For the Zimbabwean Tonga, emphasis is placed on materials concerning the Gwembe Valley, Kariba resettlement narratives, Nyaminyami spiritual cosmology, and ritual practices (Colson, E., 2006) (Fontein, J, 2015). For the South Pacific Tonga, textual analysis is directed towards ritual kava ceremonies, kinship hierarchies, and performative practices such as lakalaka (Helu, I. F., 1999); (Campbell, I.C, 2011).

Comparative thematic coding (Saldaña, J., 2016), was employed to identify convergences and divergences across domains such as spirituality, ecological adaptation, and performance of identity. This analytic strategy allowed the research to establish relational insights without collapsing the distinctiveness of each cultural system.

➤ *Theoretical Orientation*

The methodological framework is shaped by critical hermeneutics (Ricoeur, P., 1981), and decolonial methodology (Smith, L. T, 2020). Hermeneutics provides the interpretive lens for understanding symbolic systems, ritual practices, and oral traditions, while decolonial critique ensures sensitivity to power asymmetries in representation, particularly in dealing with indigenous epistemologies that have historically been marginalized by Western scholarship. By situating both Tonga groups within a comparative frame, the study resists ethnographic essentialism and foregrounds multiplicity, contestation, and cultural creativity (Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J.L., 2012).

➤ *Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations*

The study acknowledges the ethical implications of comparative work across non-contiguous cultural settings. Reflexivity is exercised by interrogating the researcher's positionality, the politics of naming ("Tonga"), and the risks of imposing false equivalence (Clifford, J., & Marcus, G.E., 2006). Instead, the comparison is framed as an epistemological exercise, what (Strathern, M., 1991), calls "partial connections", that privileges difference as much as similarity.

➤ *Methodological Contribution*

This framework contributes methodologically by advancing the use of multi-sited, comparative ethnography to engage communities that are not conventionally studied together. It demonstrates the analytical richness of juxtaposition as a strategy for deprovincializing both African and Pacific studies, while simultaneously offering a reflexive model for conducting cultural interface research across non-contiguous geographies.

➤ *Historical Origins and Settlement Patterns*

The historical origins and settlement trajectories of the Tonga people in Zimbabwe and those of the South Pacific Tonga present two distinctive yet instructive cases for

understanding cultural formation and resilience across divergent geographies. Although sharing an ethnonym, their emergence as identifiable communities was shaped by differing ecological settings, cosmological frameworks, and political-historical forces. The juxtaposition of these two trajectories underscores the methodological value of comparative inquiry into cultural interfaces.

➤ *The Tonga of Zimbabwe and the Zambezi Valley*

The Zimbabwean Tonga, also known as the BaTonga or BaTonga of the River, trace their origins to the southern reaches of the Zambezi Valley, where they established settlements along fertile riverbanks and floodplains (Colson, E. , 1971) (McGregor, J., 2009). Oral traditions situate their identity in relation to the Nyaminyami river spirit, a symbolic guardian of the Zambezi whose mythology underscores the community's profound ecological entanglement with the riverine environment (Colson, E., 2006). Historically, their subsistence strategies were based on floodplain cultivation (mabale fields), fishing, and foraging, which fostered semi-dispersed settlement patterns characterized by small homesteads and kinship-based clusters (Scudder, T., 1968).

The mid-twentieth century Kariba Dam project (1955–1959) dramatically disrupted Tonga settlement patterns, displacing an estimated 57,000 people from ancestral lands on both the Zambian and Zimbabwean sides of the Zambezi (Colson, E. , 1971); (Tremmel, M., 1994). The resettlement fragmented traditional settlement systems and restructured spatial organization around state-imposed schemes, often in less fertile upland areas. Despite this dislocation, Tonga social organization demonstrated resilience through the continuity of ritual practices, rainmaking ceremonies, and the preservation of kinship-based settlement clusters, which remain central to their identity and survival strategies (Fontein, J., 2015).

➤ *The Tonga of the South Pacific (Polynesia)*

By contrast, the Tonga of the South Pacific, occupying the Kingdom of Tonga in western Polynesia, emerged as one of the most enduring cultural and political entities of Oceania. Linguistically and culturally, they are situated within the Austronesian expansion, with archaeological evidence of settlement in Tonga dating back to around 1000 BCE during the Lapita cultural horizon (Kirch, P.V., 2017). Early settlement patterns were coastal, enabling reliance on maritime subsistence strategies including fishing, shellfishing, and horticulture of root crops such as yam and taro. The archipelagic geography fostered a strong orientation towards seafaring, with Tonga becoming a central hub of oceanic navigation and long-distance voyaging networks (Campbell, I.C., 2011) (Kaepler, A., 1999).

The consolidation of Tonga as a polity occurred through the rise of the Tu'i Tonga dynasty around the 10th–11th century CE, which organized settlement into hierarchical chiefdoms and extended political influence across Fiji, Samoa, and other parts of Polynesia (Shore, B. , 1989) (Helu, I. F., 1999). Settlements were spatially stratified according to social rank, with chiefly compounds occupying elevated or central sites, while commoner households were

organized in proximity to subsistence fields and fishing grounds. Ritual spaces, such as malae (ceremonial grounds), and performance traditions like the lakalaka further embedded social hierarchy into spatial organization (Campbell, I.C., 2011). Unlike the Zimbabwean Tonga, whose settlements were fragmented by colonial displacement, the South Pacific Tonga maintained relative continuity in spatial organization, albeit shaped by encounters with European missionaries, traders, and later colonial administrators during the 18th and 19th centuries.

III. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

The historical settlement patterns of the two Tonga groups highlight both convergence and divergence. While the Zimbabwean Tonga developed intimate ties to riverine ecologies and flexible kinship-based homesteads, the South Pacific Tonga forged a maritime-oriented, stratified settlement system embedded within expansive inter-island networks. Both, however, reveal how ecological embeddedness and cosmological frameworks shape cultural identity: for the Zimbabwean Tonga, the Zambezi River is central, while for the South Pacific Tonga, the Pacific Ocean constitutes the cultural lifeworld. Crucially, both histories illuminate how external disruptions, colonial engineering in Africa and missionary/colonial contact in Polynesia reshaped settlement configurations, yet were met with strategies of cultural resilience and adaptation.

➤ *Language and Worldview of the Tonga People in Zimbabwe and the Tonga People in Pacific Polynesia.*

Language constitutes a central pillar through which communities articulate their cosmological perception, histories, and socio-cultural systems. Both the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe and the Tonga of the South Pacific Polynesia construct their worldviews through distinctive linguistic repertoires that encode ecological knowledge, social organization, and cosmological beliefs. While they share a common ethnonym, their linguistic trajectories and cultural grammars reflect divergent historical geographies, yielding a fascinating comparative interface.

➤ *Tonga in Zimbabwe: The Zambezi Valley Tongwe Language and Cosmology*

The Tonga language in Zimbabwe (locally referred to as Chitonga) belongs to the Bantu family, specifically the Zone M languages (M60), closely related to Nyanja and Shona (Ehret, C. , 1998) (Doke, C. M. , n.d.). Its semantic structures are deeply rooted in the Zambezi River ecology, with metaphors, idioms, and oral traditions mapping directly onto the hydrological and agricultural rhythms of the floodplain. For instance, the invocation of Nyaminyami, the river spirit, emerges not merely as myth but as a linguistic anchor through which collective memory of displacement, colonial disruption, and survival is narrated (Colson, E. , 1971); (Magadza, C. H. D. , 2006).

The lexicon reflects an epistemological framework in which water, fertility, kinship, and reciprocity are interwoven. Terms for cultivation, fishing, and rainmaking rituals embody an ecological worldview, situating the human

community within a relational ontology of land, ancestors, and spiritual forces (Chabata, E., 2012). Thus, the Tonga worldview is less anthropocentric than relational, emphasizing continuity between human and non-human agents mediated by ritual speech, praise poetry, and proverbial wisdom.

➤ *Tonga in the South Pacific: Polynesian Tonga Language and Worldview.*

In contrast, the Polynesian Tonga language (lea fakatonga), an Austronesian tongue within the Polynesian subgroup, demonstrates a seafaring cosmology rooted in the oceanic expanses of the South Pacific (Biggs, B. , 1971) (Campbell, I.C, 2011). Its linguistic structures are saturated with references to navigation, celestial orientation, kinship rank, and ritual performance. For example, the highly stratified speech registers—lea fakamatāpule (speech of attendants), lea fakatu‘i (royal speech)—encode hierarchical worldviews that sacralize authority and reinforce sociopolitical order (Shumway, E. , 2014).

The worldview embodied in Tongan language situates humans within a cosmological order mediated by mana (spiritual power) and tapu (sacred restriction), linguistically encoded in ceremonial speech, kava rituals, and poetic performance (lakalaka). As with their Zimbabwean counterparts, cosmology is not abstract but articulated through linguistic practice, where metaphors of the sea, voyaging, and genealogy provide continuity between past, present, and future (Kaepler, A. L., 1993) (Mahina, O. , 2010).

➤ *Comparative Reflections: Language as Worldview Interface*

Despite their genealogical divergence, Bantu versus Austronesian, both Tonga communities demonstrate the centrality of language as a vehicle for ecological knowledge, social cohesion, and cosmological orientation. The Zambezi Tonga encode a worldview of riverine relationality, while the Polynesian Tonga articulate an oceanic cosmology of voyaging and hierarchy. In both cases, language does not merely describe the world but constitutes the world as lived and experienced.

This comparative linguistic anthropology underscores how different ecologies, river valleys and archipelagos, yield distinct semantic universes yet converge in positioning language as a performative medium of ontology. The cultural interface thus lies not in shared linguistic ancestry but in the structural role of language as a repository of worldview, a site where memory, power, and cosmology are inscribed and transmitted.

IV. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Religion and Spirituality of the Tonga People in Zimbabwe and the Tonga People in the South Pacific have a great bearing in an attempt to understand their relationships. Because, religion and spirituality form the deep structures through which both the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley and the Tonga of the South Pacific articulate meaning, negotiate

identity, and maintain continuity between the human, natural, and metaphysical orders. Although separated by geography and linguistic genealogy, both communities reveal cosmological systems that are profoundly ecological, relational, and performative in character.

➤ *The Tonga of Zimbabwe: Riverine Spirituality and Ancestral Mediation*

Among the Zimbabwean Tonga, religion is anchored in the ecology of the Zambezi River, whose flow historically determined subsistence, ritual practice, and social cohesion. Central to Tonga cosmology is the veneration of Nyaminyami, the river spirit regarded as a guardian and provider of sustenance, fertility, and protection (Colson, E. , 1971) (McGregor, J., 2009). This spiritual ontology is embodied in rainmaking ceremonies, rituals of appeasement, and sacrificial offerings performed at sacred riverine shrines.

Ancestral mediation is a defining element of Tonga religiosity, wherein the living maintain reciprocal relationships with the dead through ritual offerings and communicative acts (Chikozho, C. , 2005). Religious practice is thus less doctrinal and more performative, embedding cosmological truths in dance, drumming, and oral liturgy. Following the traumatic displacement occasioned by the Kariba Dam (1955–1959), the loss of sacred landscapes intensified the symbolic significance of rituals, re-inscribing the memory of dispossession and reaffirming communal resilience through spirituality (Magadza, C. H. D. , 2006).

➤ *The Tonga of the South Pacific: Oceanic Cosmology and Sacred Order.*

By contrast, the Tongan people of Polynesia embed their spirituality in the vastness of the ocean and in genealogical order. Religion is centred on the notions of mana (sacred power) and tapu (sacred restriction), both of which regulate social and spiritual hierarchies (Campbell, I.C, 2011) (Kaepler, A. L., 1993). Spirituality is inseparable from political order, with the sacred kingship (hau) embodying both divine legitimacy and ancestral authority.

Ritual practices such as the kava ceremony and lakalaka dance performances serve as sites where cosmology, history, and social hierarchy are enacted (Shumway, E. , 2014). The sea, as both a source of sustenance and a metaphorical horizon, is sacralized through voyaging traditions and celestial navigation, reinforcing a worldview that sees the divine as immanent in natural forces and genealogical continuity (Mahina, O. , 2010). While Christian missionary influence has reconfigured much of contemporary Tongan spirituality, traditional cosmological principles remain embedded in ceremonial practice and kinship ideology.

➤ *Comparative Reflections: Religion as Relational Cosmology*

Despite their divergent contexts, that is riverine valley versus oceanic archipelago, both Tonga communities configure religion as relational rather than institutional. In Zimbabwe, spirituality is mediated through the river and ancestral spirits; in the Pacific, through the ocean, genealogy,

and sacred kingship. Both emphasize reciprocity with non-human agents, embedding metaphysical authority within ecological systems.

Where the Zimbabwean Tonga express spirituality through rituals of survival and resistance to displacement, the Polynesian Tonga enact it through hierarchical ceremonialism and the sacralization of voyaging traditions. This comparative lens reveals religion not as a static doctrine but as a lived cosmology that embodies ecological intimacy, collective identity, and resilience against colonial disruptions.

➤ *Contrasting Spiritual Cosmologies of the Tonga in Zimbabwe and the Tonga in the South Pacific.*

The Tonga of the Zambezi Valley and the Tonga of Polynesia articulate spirituality through distinct cosmological grammars that reflect their ecological landscapes, historical trajectories, and modes of social organization. Although separated by vast geography and divergent linguistic genealogies, both cosmologies position spirituality as the relational fabric binding humans, nature, and the metaphysical realm.

➤ *Riverine Cosmology of the Zimbabwean Tonga.*

For the Zambezi Tonga, spirituality is inseparable from the riverine environment. The figure of Nyaminyami, the serpent-like river deity, embodies a cosmology of reciprocity and ecological interdependence (Colson, E. , 1971); (McGregor, J., 2009). The river is not merely a natural feature but a living metaphysical presence through which fertility, disaster, and survival are mediated. Ancestral spirits (midzimu) act as intermediaries, guiding moral conduct and maintaining continuity between the living and the dead (Chikozho, C. , 2005).

This cosmology emphasizes circularity, where rituals of rainmaking, sacrificial offerings, and seasonal ceremonies sustain harmony between people, ancestors, and land. The forced displacement during the construction of the Kariba Dam disrupted these spiritual geographies, transforming cosmology into a vehicle of resistance, remembrance, and adaptation as alluded by (Magadza, C. H. D. , 2006).

➤ *Oceanic Cosmology of the Polynesian Tonga.*

In contrast, the spirituality of the Polynesian Tonga is oceanic and hierarchical. The cosmos is ordered through principles of mana (sacred power) and tapu (sacred restriction), which regulate social order, religious practice, and ecological stewardship (Campbell, I.C., 2011) (Mahina, O. , 2010). Sacred kingship (hau) and aristocratic genealogies are central, with rulers perceived as divine intermediaries whose authority is ritually legitimized through elaborate ceremonies such as the kava ritual (Kaeppeler, 1993).

The sea itself functions as both sacred space and metaphorical horizon, symbolizing cosmological depth and continuity. Navigation, star lore, and ritual voyaging reinforce a worldview in which human existence is inseparable from the ocean's divine order. While Christianity reshaped much of Tongan religious life, the persistence of

ceremonialism and ritual performance sustains continuity with pre-Christian cosmology (Shumway, 2014).

➤ *Comparative Insights*

The divergence lies primarily in the cosmological anchors: the Zambezi Tonga orient their spirituality around a river deity and ancestral mediation, while the Polynesian Tonga structure theirs around oceanic sacristy and genealogical hierarchy. The Zimbabwean Tonga cosmology is deeply egalitarian and ecological, emphasizing communal survival and reciprocal relationships with the natural world. Conversely, the Polynesian Tonga cosmology is stratified, encoding spiritual authority into political hierarchy and ritualized performance.

Yet both cosmologies converge in their refusal to separate the spiritual from the ecological. Whether riverine or oceanic, both worlds are sacralized, rendering landscapes as metaphysical spaces where divine presence, ancestral memory, and communal identity coalesce. Religion thus becomes both ontology and ecology, an embodied practice through which the Tonga, in Africa and the Pacific, continue to affirm their cultural distinctiveness and resilience.

V. MUSIC, DANCE, AND ORAL TRADITIONS

Music, Dance, and Oral Traditions of the Tonga People in Zimbabwe and the Tonga People in the South Pacific. Music, dance, and oral traditions serve as vital modes of cultural expression and repositories of collective memory among both the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley in Zimbabwe and the Tonga of the South Pacific. Despite their geographical distance and distinct linguistic lineages, both groups have cultivated expressive traditions that function as pedagogical tools, ritual performances, and mechanisms of cultural continuity. These artistic forms embody their cosmological worldviews, encode historical memory, and sustain communal identity.

➤ *Tonga of Zimbabwe: Drumming, Dance, and Oral Performance in Riverine Culture*

Among the Zimbabwean Tonga, music and dance are inseparable from ritual practice and social life. Central to their expressive repertoire is the use of ngoma drums, rattles, and polyphonic clapping patterns that accompany ceremonies such as rainmaking, initiation rites, and funerary rituals (Mitchell, J. C. , 2010); (Chikomborero, M. (2018), 2018). The rhythms, often cyclical and trance-inducing, mirror the seasonal and riverine cycles that shape Tonga cosmology, emphasizing the continuity of life, death, and regeneration.

Dance functions both as ritual enactment and communal pedagogy. Performed in sacred and social contexts, dances such as the *budima* embody ancestral memory, connecting the living with the spiritual world (Colson, 2006). Oral traditions, myths, folktales, and proverbial speech, these play an equally central role, transmitting ecological wisdom, historical experience, and moral values. Narratives of Nyaminyami, the river spirit, for example, circulate orally as both mythic cosmology and

historical commentary on the Kariba Dam displacement (McGregor, 2009).

➤ *Tonga of the South Pacific: Choral Performance, Dance, and Oral Poetics in Oceanic Culture*

By contrast, the Tongan people of Polynesia have developed a highly stratified and ceremonial artistic culture, where music, dance, and oral performance articulate social hierarchy, cosmological order, and political legitimacy. Central to this tradition is choral singing (hiva), often performed in large ensembles during rituals, chiefly ceremonies, and community gatherings. The lakalaka, a UNESCO-recognized intangible cultural heritage, epitomizes the fusion of music, dance, and oratory. In these performances, synchronized movements, poetic lyrics, and stylized gestures reinforce collective identity and the authority of chiefs (Kaepler, 1993; Campbell, 2011).

Oral traditions in Tonga Polynesia are deeply genealogical, structured around kau faka'ilonga (lineage histories) and performed through chant and oratory. These narratives not only preserve historical memory but also sacralize political authority, tracing chiefly lines back to divine origins (Mahina, 2010). Dance, often performed collectively, functions as a cosmological enactment of balance, reciprocity, and the rhythmic order of the sea and stars.

➤ *Comparative Reflections: Aesthetic Cosmologies*

The comparison reveals striking differences in aesthetic cosmologies. The Zimbabwean Tonga emphasize rhythm, trance, and ecological symbolism in music and dance, embedding spirituality within the cycles of the river and land. Their oral traditions serve as ecological pedagogy and repositories of resilience in the face of displacement. In contrast, the Polynesian Tonga emphasize ceremonial grandeur, choral harmony, and hierarchical symbolism, where oral traditions legitimize authority and anchor social order in divine genealogy.

Yet both communities converge in the function of expressive culture as a vehicle of resilience, continuity, and cosmological enactment. Whether through the budima drum rhythms of the Zambezi or the lakalaka performances of Polynesia, artistic traditions embody spirituality, preserve memory, and articulate the interface between human society and the sacred cosmos.

VI. KINSHIP, SOCIAL STRUCTURES, AND GENDER

Kingship, Social Structure, and Gender among the Tonga in Zimbabwe and the Tonga in the South Pacific conversely interrogate and the study shows very interesting cyanates. The organization of political authority, social relations, and gender roles provides a critical lens for understanding the cultural logics of the Tonga of the Zambezi Valley and the Tonga of Polynesia. While the two groups are genealogically unrelated, both articulate unique frameworks of authority and gendered sociality that reflect their

ecological contexts, cosmologies, and historical transformations.

➤ *Tonga of Zimbabwe: Egalitarian Structures and Gender Complementarity*

The Tonga of the Zambezi Valley traditionally lack centralized kingship structures. Their political system is segmentary and kinship-based, with authority vested in lineage heads (bantwana) and local spirit mediums who mediate between communities and the ancestral world (Colson, 1971; McGregor, 2009). This diffuse organization has been interpreted as adaptive to the riverine ecology, where mobility, reciprocity, and flexible kinship ties ensured survival in fluctuating floodplain environments (Scudder, T., 1962).

Gender relations within this framework emphasize complementarity rather than rigid hierarchy. Women play vital roles in agricultural production, ritual practice, and kinship continuity. Oral traditions and ethnographic accounts highlight the authority of women as custodians of seed, ritual knowledge, and spiritual mediation (Colson, 2006). While colonial and missionary interventions introduced patriarchal distortions, traditional Tonga social structures reveal an embedded gender equilibrium, where authority is negotiated within reciprocal spheres of influence.

➤ *Tonga of the South Pacific: Sacred Kingship and Hierarchical Gendered Order*

By contrast, the Tonga of Polynesia developed one of the most elaborate hierarchical systems in Oceania, centred on the institution of sacred kingship (hau). The monarch (Tu'i Tonga) historically embodied divine legitimacy, with authority sanctioned through sacred genealogies linking rulers to the gods (Campbell, 2011). This political theology embedded mana (sacred power) and tapu (sacred restriction) into social life, structuring a stratified order of chiefs, attendants (matāpule), and commoners (Kaepler, 1993).

Gender in the Polynesian Tonga context is both hierarchical and paradoxical. While political authority is primarily vested in men, women of high rank, particularly sisters of chiefs (fahu), possess elevated ritual authority that transcends male political power (Shumway, 2014). The fahu principle situates sisters as socially superior to brothers, allowing women to exercise influence in ceremonial contexts, kinship negotiations, and inheritance claims (Mahina, 2010). Thus, while the system is rigidly stratified, gendered authority is not monolithic but negotiated across domains of kinship and ritual.

➤ *Comparative Reflections: Diffusion and Hierarchy*

The comparison reveals two divergent yet instructive models of social organization. The Zimbabwean Tonga embody a diffuse, egalitarian structure, where authority is decentralized and gender roles are complementary, reflecting the adaptive demands of a riverine ecology. The Polynesian Tonga, conversely, represent a highly stratified polity, where sacred kingship and hierarchical order are ritually legitimized, yet where women retain ritual authority through the fahu principle.

In both contexts, however, gender is relational rather than fixed, mediated through kinship, ritual, and cosmology. The Zambezi Tonga express this relationality through shared labor and ancestral mediation, while the Polynesian Tonga encode it through ceremonial rank and sacred genealogies. These distinctions highlight how differing ecologies and cosmological principles produce divergent models of kingship, social structure, and gender, while still positioning authority as a sacred and relational phenomenon.

VII. COLONIAL ENCOUNTERS AND MODERN CHALLENGES.

Both groups of people have their reaction to the colonial circumstances and their cultural fibers entails a story of resilience, tolerance, long suffering and accommodating. However the Tonga community in the Pacific continued to hold fast on their culture more as compared with their counterparts.

➤ *Tonga of Zimbabwe: Displacement, Marginalization, and Developmental Exclusion*

The colonial encounter of the Tonga in the Zambezi Valley was profoundly marked by displacement and dispossession. The construction of the Kariba Dam in the late 1950s under the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland resulted in the forced relocation of approximately 57,000 Gwembe Tonga, permanently disrupting their riverine ecological economy (Scudder, T., 2005) (Colson, E., 1971). The loss of fertile floodplains, sacred sites, and fishing grounds not only eroded subsistence patterns but also destabilized spiritual and ritual ties to the Zambezi River, which is conceived as a living cosmological entity (Colson, 2006).

Colonial and postcolonial states compounded this marginalization by relegating the Tonga to peripheral lands with limited access to infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Even in post-independence Zimbabwe and Zambia, the Tonga remain politically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged, often framed as “backward” in national discourses of development (Magadza, 2006). Contemporary challenges include climate change impacts on subsistence farming, limited integration into national markets, and youth migration in search of economic opportunities (Musoni, F., 2019). Yet, despite structural exclusion, Tonga communities continue to mobilize cultural resilience through oral traditions, rituals, and transnational advocacy against displacement and developmental injustice.

➤ *Tonga of Polynesia: Colonial Subjugation, Christianity, and Globalization*

The Tongan people of the South Pacific encountered European expansion from the late eighteenth century, with James Cook’s voyages (1773–1777) initiating sustained contact (Campbell, 2011). While Tonga avoided direct colonization, maintaining formal sovereignty under the 1875 Constitution of King George Tupou I, its autonomy was gradually constrained by British protectorate status (1900–1970) (Campbell, I. C., 2021). The protectorate system

entrenched missionary Christianity, disrupted indigenous cosmologies, and reconfigured political institutions around constitutional monarchy, aligning Tonga with European models of governance (Latukefu, S., 1974).

Christianity profoundly reshaped Tongan cultural life, displacing many traditional ritual practices, yet it was simultaneously indigenized, producing a syncretic religio-political identity wherein monarchy and Christianity became mutually reinforcing symbols of legitimacy (Kaepler, 1993). Modern challenges for the Polynesian Tonga are distinct from their African counterparts: globalization, migration, and climate change. High rates of outmigration to New Zealand, Australia, and the United States have created a transnational Tongan diaspora, with remittances forming a critical component of the national economy (Brown, R. P. C., & Leeves, G., 2011). Meanwhile, climate change poses existential threats, with rising sea levels and cyclones intensifying debates on sovereignty and cultural continuity.

➤ *Comparative Reflections: Parallel Marginalities and Divergent Pathways*

Although located in different colonial and ecological contexts as multiple times discussed before, both Tonga groups illustrate how colonial encounters reconfigured cultural systems while embedding structural vulnerabilities. For the Zambezi Tonga, displacement and marginalization stemmed from extractive colonial development projects and postcolonial neglect. For the Polynesian Tonga, the challenge was not territorial dispossession but rather political restructuring under Christianized monarchy and dependency on global systems.

Modern challenges also reflect these divergent trajectories: Zimbabwean Tonga grapple with landlessness, poverty, and developmental exclusion, while Polynesian Tonga negotiate diasporic identity, economic reliance on remittances, and environmental precarity. Yet, in both cases, resilience is evident in cultural continuity, whether through riverine ritual memory in Africa or through the maintenance of kinship and ceremonial practices across vast diasporic networks in Polynesia.

VIII. CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL INTERFACES AND GLOBALIZATION

The cultural trajectories of the Tonga of Zimbabwe’s Zambezi Valley and the Tonga of Polynesia are increasingly shaped by globalization, transnational flows, and the reconfiguration of identity in contemporary contexts. While the two communities are not historically related, their encounters with modernity reveal shared dynamics of cultural resilience, hybridization, and global interconnectivity, producing new forms of interface that traverse geography and history.

➤ *Tonga of Zimbabwe: Cultural Resilience, Diaspora, and Media*

For the Tonga of Zimbabwe, contemporary globalization is experienced through diasporic migration, media representation, and cultural activism. Displacement

from the Zambezi during the Kariba Dam project produced not only local marginalization but also transnational networks of advocacy that continue to link the Tonga to global discourses on development justice and indigenous rights (McGregor, J., 2009); (Nyawo, V. , 2020). NGOs and local cultural associations such as Basilwizi Trust actively promote Tonga language revival, oral traditions, and digital archiving of folktales and songs, ensuring intergenerational continuity in the face of linguistic erosion (Mashingaidze, T, 2013).

Music and cultural festivals, particularly the annual Lwiindi Gonde Ceremony, have become spaces of cultural interface where Tonga traditions are showcased to broader Zimbabwean and international audiences. Moreover, digital technologies, including social media platforms, have allowed Tonga youth to assert cultural identity in global circuits, reframing marginality into visibility (Chikowero, M. , 2015). Thus, the Zambezi Tonga engage globalization not merely as a force of erasure but as an arena of cultural re-articulation.

➤ *Tonga of Polynesia: Diaspora, Remittances, and Transnational Identity*

The Tongan people of the South Pacific navigate globalization through extensive diasporic networks and remittance economies, with nearly half of the Tongan population residing abroad in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States (Evans, M. , 2019). Globalization is mediated through the circulation of capital, culture, and kinship obligations, with remittances constituting over 30% of Tonga's GDP (Brown & Leeves, 2011).

This economic reliance is intertwined with the performance of cultural identity in diasporic spaces. Ceremonial exchanges (koloa faka-Tonga), church gatherings, and rugby culture serve as vehicles through which Tongans assert collective identity while negotiating pressures of assimilation (Morton, H, 2011). Furthermore, globalization has amplified Tonga's cultural visibility: Tongan music, dance, and ritual have become symbols of Pacific identity in international diasporic festivals and digital media platforms (Kaepler, A. L. , 2010). Yet, alongside opportunities, globalization introduces challenges—such as the commodification of cultural forms, intergenerational tensions, and vulnerabilities to global economic volatility.

➤ *Cultural Interfaces Across Borders: Shared Themes of Resilience*

Though separated by geography and history, both Tonga communities illustrate how globalization simultaneously disrupts and revitalizes cultural systems. The Zambezi Tonga mobilize memory, ritual, and digital advocacy to resist marginalization and assert belonging within Zimbabwe and beyond. The Polynesian Tonga, while embedded in transnational circuits of migration and remittances, sustain cultural identity through ritualized kinship exchanges and diasporic solidarity.

The contemporary interface between these communities lies less in direct contact and more in parallel engagements with globalization, where local traditions are refracted through global processes of circulation, media, and

identity politics. Both groups exemplify what Appadurai (1996) terms “scapes” of globalization, where ethnoscaping, finanscaping, and mediascaping intersect to reshape cultural belonging. These interfaces highlight the agency of marginalized communities in transforming globalization from a homogenizing force into a terrain of cultural creativity and resilience.

IX. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of the Tonga of Zimbabwe's Zambezi Valley and the Tonga of the South Pacific reveals that cultural identity, while deeply rooted in local ecologies and historical trajectories, is simultaneously reconstituted through encounters with colonialism, globalization, and modernity. Although the two groups share no genealogical ties, their juxtaposition exposes how communities located on the margins of dominant historical narratives construct resilience, negotiate cultural continuity, and reposition themselves in shifting global landscapes.

In the Zambezi context, Tonga cultural identity has been shaped by displacement, marginalization, and developmental exclusion, particularly following the forced relocations occasioned by the Kariba Dam. Yet, rather than succumbing to cultural erasure, the Tonga have demonstrated a remarkable ability to reinscribe ancestral cosmologies, language, and ritual into contemporary frameworks of activism and cultural revival. Their worldview—centered on the river as both ecological and spiritual lifeline—continues to structure social organization, oral traditions, and identity politics. In this sense, the Zambezi Tonga embody what can be described as a “resilient marginality,” where survival and cultural endurance are intimately connected to ancestral memory and the strategic use of global advocacy networks.

By contrast, the Polynesian Tonga articulate a model of hierarchical kingship, ritualized kinship, and diasporic expansion. Their history of limited colonization under British protectorate status allowed them to maintain sovereignty, albeit within a Christianized and globalized monarchy. The transformation of sacred kingship into a Christian constitutional framework demonstrates a capacity for cultural synthesis, where imported ideologies were rearticulated into indigenous cosmologies of authority. In the contemporary moment, the Polynesian Tonga negotiate globalization not from the position of exclusion but through diasporic integration, remittances, and transnational cultural visibility. Their challenge lies less in erasure and more in balancing the commodification of tradition with the need to sustain authenticity across a dispersed and globalized community.

Placed in dialogue, the two Tonga communities underscore the plural ways in which cultural continuity and transformation are negotiated. The Zambezi Tonga illustrate the politics of invisibility and exclusion, where survival depends on cultural resilience against state neglect and ecological precarity. The Polynesian Tonga embody the politics of visibility, where survival depends on negotiating identity within global diasporic circuits and transnational economies. Yet both converge in their demonstration that

culture is not static but dynamically adaptive, serving as both resource and weapon in negotiating modern challenges.

The cultural interface between the two communities lies not in direct interaction but in their parallel struggles with power, displacement, and globalization. Both groups, albeit through different trajectories, reveal how cosmology, ritual, and kinship remain the bedrock of cultural life, even when reshaped by colonial disruptions or global flows. This comparative study therefore contributes to broader debates on indigeneity, resilience, and cultural hybridity, highlighting how local communities engage with global structures without forfeiting their cultural distinctiveness.

Ultimately, the Tonga of the Zambezi and the Tonga of Polynesia remind us that culture operates as both anchor and compass: an anchor that roots communities in ancestral memory, and a compass that enables navigation through the turbulent waters of colonial encounters, globalization, and ecological uncertainty. Their experiences underscore the necessity of attending to indigenous voices in scholarly and policy discourses, not as remnants of the past, but as active agents shaping the cultural futures of Africa, Oceania, and the wider world.

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