

10 HONORABLE TRAITS OF PACIFIC ISLANDER CULTURE

Culture is a living phenomenon, and it continues to change and evolve.

Even so, there are markers of individual cultures that help define and set it apart. These markers are celebrated as inherent gifts in a homogeneous society. Unfortunately, it is not always celebrated in a multicultural world, where assimilation and acculturation are the rules.

Far from being gifts, they are seen as liabilities and hindrances to moving forward in life. We need to honor these cultural markers, as they provide meaning and identity to so many who live and work in the margins of society. Here are some of the markers of the Pacific Island way of life and culture, and honorable ways to learn about these gifts.

1 A DESIRE TO SEE AND KNOW PACIFIC ISLANDERS

The term Pacific Islander is a racial ethnic distinction that describes the inhabitants of Oceania.

The greatest obstacle to learning from one another is being invisible. How can you learn about my culture if you don't even see me or know me? Part of that is knowing who Pacific Islanders are. The term Pacific Islander refers to those who trace their origins to the Island Nations of the Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian regions. Over 20 thousand islands are scattered over the vast Pacific Ocean and make up the "Pacific Islands of Oceania", or what Epeli Hau'ofa, a Pacific Island scholar, terms "a sea of islands." The term Pacific Islander is a racial ethnic distinction that describes the inhabitants of Oceania, and appropriately identifies all who hail from that vast ocean. When the subject is of or about a specific island group, however, it is important to identify the particular island (i.e. Tongans, Samoans, Fijians, Native Hawaiians, etc.); and more importantly, to understand, that although they share a common heritage and history, each specific group has their own identity with accompanying language, customs, and practices.

2 HAVE A GENUINE APPRECIATION FOR THE VALUE OF RESPECT WITHIN THE PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURE

Respect is a central component of Pacific Island culture; a pillar of island culture and life.

Respect is a central component of Pacific Island culture; a pillar of island culture and life. More than a word, it is a practice that orders life and dictates mutual obligations and responsibilities within the social structure of Pacific Island life. As such, children know their place in the immediate family, in the extended family setting, in the church, and in the larger society. Respect dictates actions that nurture and sustain relationships in a web of reciprocity and mutuality. From the outside, this system may seem outdated and burdensome, but is in fact a lifeline within Pacific Island culture; and one that needs to be affirmed and honored. Whether in their home countries or in the diaspora, Pacific Islanders continue to carry respect within them and implement it in all that they do.

3 UNDERSTAND THIS PRIMARY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURE AND WESTERN MAINSTREAM CULTURE: COMMUNAL VS. INDIVIDUALISTIC

This way of life is not something of the past. It is still a mainstay within Pacific Island culture and diaspora.

Scattered in the vast Pacific Ocean, Pacific Island life and civilization is sustained by a system of communal care and accountability. Collective and social cooperation are essential traits for living in remote locations that were often geographically cut off from the rest of the world, and as such, defined by a lack of material goods. Outside the purview of globalization and capitalism, these societies focus on means that will sustain everyone, and discourage self-sufficiency and independence. This way of life is not something of the past. It is still a mainstay within Pacific Island culture and diaspora.

4 MANY PACIFIC ISLANDERS CHOOSE TO HAVE A TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY

Transnational communities are migrant populations living in a country other than their own with strong ties to their country of origin.

Transnational communities are migrant populations living in a country other than their own with strong ties to their country of origin. U.S. born Pacific Islanders make a choice to self-identify as transnational cultural beings, oftentimes providing support for their families and communities "back home" in various forms. This transnational identity is also evident in the church as members participate in school, village, and national fundraising efforts for their home countries of origin.

5 MANY PACIFIC ISLANDERS LIVE WITHIN THE TENSION OF "STUCK BETWEEN TWO PLACES"

Pacific Islanders sustain and develop their cultural identity by fulfilling obligations to family, community, and their country of origin.

Research on Pacific Islanders in the diaspora frequently identify hardships they face in fulfilling cultural obligations while trying to adapt to a Western way of life. In the U.S. Pacific Islanders sustain and develop their cultural identity by fulfilling obligations to family, community, and their country of origin. This is typically done in the church setting as it is often a common place Pacific Islanders gather to practice their language and traditions.

6 FOR PACIFIC ISLANDERS, IT IS TRUE, "BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER."

Standards of beauty are defined by a holistic approach, honoring practices and customs that sustain communal life.

For Pacific Islanders, standards of beauty are defined by a holistic approach, honoring practices and customs that sustain communal life. Beauty is not merely about skin tone, length of hair, or body size (among other things), but is more about how a person lives his or her life within the larger extended community. And, speaking of size, in many parts of the Pacific, the larger the frame, the more beautiful. That said, changes in lifestyle and practices brought on by globalization and migration have led to real medical issues with obesity and other physical challenges. Suffice it to say, beauty is not something to be trifled with in Pacific Islander circles.

7 HOSPITALITY IS A HALLMARK OF PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURE

Pacific Islanders were accustomed to receiving one another in remote islands, and hospitality was the rule for such engagements.

One of the ways that respect is played out (made action) in Pacific Island culture is through the practice of hospitality. Using traditional navigation for thousands of years, Pacific Islanders were accustomed to receiving one another in remote islands, and hospitality was the rule for such engagements. Today, it is still the rule in the Pacific Islands and the Pacific Island diaspora. All are welcome, and there are no strangers within the Pacific Island circle. This assumption of hospitality can lead to what may be perceived as bad manners from the mainstream Western introduce. For example, it is not common practice to introduce someone who is new to a given setting for the simple reason there are no strangers among Pacific Islanders.

8 FOOD DEFINES PACIFIC ISLAND CULTURE

Hospitality dictates that there is always more than enough food, as it signifies a spirit of generosity and abundance.

As in other cultures, food has specific connotations for Pacific Islanders. Hospitality dictates that there is always more than enough food, as it signifies a spirit of generosity and abundance. As such, food is never sparingly offered, as that would denote unfriendliness and animosity. And only the best is offered to guests and visitors, often to the detriment of the host family, who may have nothing left for themselves.

9 NATIVE LANGUAGES ARE GIFTS THAT HELP PRESERVE TRADITIONS AND CULTURE

Pacific Island culture has been practiced and preserved through oral traditions.

Pacific Island culture has been practiced and preserved through oral traditions. Values, attitudes, and beliefs have passed from generation to generation through the use of verbal speech, storytelling, music, performance art and other practices. As such, there is emphasis placed on the effective use of ones' voice, whether in speech or music. There is a plurality and multiplicity of meaning to words, to language. This is the gift of an oral culture, and explains the deep desire to keep ones' language alive.

10 A SPIRIT OF JOY

Pacific Islanders embody a spirit of joy and happiness that is deeply rooted in geography and social setting.

Pacific Islanders embody a spirit of joy and happiness that is deeply rooted in geography and social setting. The Pacific region is blessed with a warm climate and beautiful geography. Basic everyday needs are met through a communal subsistent economy, taking away the stress and strain that are inherent in a capitalist society, and adding a level of joy that comes from communal interactions. Tasks and chores are often group activities, which lend themselves to laughter, singing, and joking. This is a way of being, and Pacific Islanders have carried this way of being into their new settings. And perhaps, more importantly, this way of being is affirmed and reinforced by a deep faith in God, and a sense of certainty, that all will be well.