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Oral Histories of Pacific Islanders in Utah: Rape Culture and Sexual Violence

Narrator: *Raven (pseudonym)

Hello my name is Moala and I am an undergraduate researcher and scholar at the University of Utah. Thank you for willing to be a part of my project. My project is about sexual and gender based violence within the Pacific Island community. I would like to understand how this type of violence affects the people and the culture in Pacific Island communities and vice versa. I would like to understand how it is handled and why it is handled that way through oral histories. Of course you don't have to answer some of the questions or any of the questions for that matter.

Q: Can you give us your name, pronouns, just a basic overview of yourself?

A: Raven, she her, um I don't know what else.

Q: Yeah that's good, thank you. So the first question is tell me about your family? Where do you live? Do you have any family members living with you? Where in the Pacific Islands is your family from? Things like that.

A: Oh yeah that's a loaded question... So I currently live in Utah. I have my own home. I grew up in Hawai'i with my Samoan family... So I have my palangi [white/caucasian] family but at the same time there's two of my Hawaiian families that I became very close with. So like Hawaiian culture my hanai [adopted: informal and/or formal] parents, they call me their daughter I call them my parents. It's literally ... it's no different I guess you could say like some people say, "oh you only have one mom, you only have one dad," anything I can ask of my Samoan parents or that I would, I can ask any set of my parents and it's the same. Because of that, then I have tons of siblings, nieces, nephews and what

not. Right now in my home I have one sister living with me and husband from my Samoan family and then one sister and her husband and three kids from one of my Hawaiian families. It's a lot I know. And also my niece from my Samoan family, my sister who lives with me who's Samoan, her second oldest daughter and her fiance lives with me. That's the only brown folks that live in my house, the rest are white.

Interview: Wow, that sounds fun.

A: It can be, but it all depends on your definition of fun

Q: Yeah yeah thank you so the next question is getting into our first category or section of taboo. So the first one is what is a taboo topic in Pacific Island families?

A: Well definitely rape, mental health, I guess any topic that would put a bad light on Pacific Islanders is considered taboo in my eyes. Just kind of like don't talk about it. It'll go away like sweep it under the rug. Those are the two specifically that I know we don't talk about and, oh no another thing is specifically towards families meaning... say your the youngest and your older sister had a baby when she was young but was raised by your grandparents so you grew knowing that that was your aunty biologically that's you sister, like that; there's a lot of that, but you don't talk about it, you don't talk about it that's a no no.

Q: Why do you think these issues are taboo to us? You kinda touched on this but yeah.

A: Yeah I think it's the same with the whole, what we would deemed would bring shame to the culture in itself and when I say "we" I don't mean all Samoans. In my upbringing it was kinda like you don't talk about things that's gonna make our family look bad or

smear our family name or anything like that so... it's all about image but it's not kind of deal. We get a lot of, "do as I say not as I do," kind of deal. Act like white folks but not too white.

Interviewer: In the middle, somewhere in the middle.

Narrator: Yeah somewhere in the middle and who gets to define like, "ok that's enough being white, now you can be brown," kind of deal. I think it's silly, but I can understand the loss of culture with colonization and what not.

Q: Alright thank you.

Narrator: Welcome.

Q: So what are some of the responses that you have experienced yourself or you have seen when these topics are brought up?

A: Ha! Told to shut up, you're stupid, you're being dumb, you make us look stupid, you know... you sound like an idiot. Even my name, I remember as a young child my family calls me shortened name, but everyone else calls me by my full first name so aside from family like nobody else called me by my shortened name it was just a family name. As I came to like... so all of elementary it was always my full first name and as I went into the seventh grade because it was different district I was like, "you know what I'm gonna have people call me by my shortened name cause that's who I am. That's me." And I remember my sister telling me, "you're so stupid, you sound so dumb." Like really? You have one name, you don't have a nickname like you're name is the same no matter where you go. So it was kind of like an identity thing for me. I don't wanna be one people at school and one person at home. So that's definitely something that... which has changed

as I've gotten older. Now that I'm on the mainland because people can't say my shortened name and to those people I say, "call me by my full first name." Yeah it's weird, but that's just it. Yeah it's sad, anyways that's what's happened.

Q: Yeah, yeah. Do you think your culture has affected these reactions? Like your cultural identity?

A: Oh no definitely. I remember, just another example. After I went into, and I don't want to say I went into foster care, I became a foster child because my palangi family, they weren't foster parents. It's just the way things went that they applied to be my foster parents so it's not like a foster home I went to anyways, so because of this I remember my sister had shared what shared was the truth, which was a totally lie in itself, and I had run into my cousins in college and even then when she was telling me like, "yeah your sister told us this, your sister told us this." And I said, "well we can definitely speak about it you know," and she corrected me and she's like, "you mean talk." I was like, "What?" She says, "we can talk about it." And I said, "that's what I said." She says, "No you said we can speak about it." It's the same thing, but because to her that was me being too whute. I was speaking proper english... cause I was all like, "you understood what the hell I was saying, why does it matter that I use a different word." Yeah that was in their eyes me fiepalangi [the desire or want to be and behave as a caucasian] and it didn't serve the time. That was not the time they wanted me to be white enough.

Q: Yeah and this next question kind of goes with your response, trying to balance being too white or being too much into your culture. What are some of the cultural beliefs and morals that are prevalent in the community that may affect the reaction of sexual violence within the home?

A: I think, and this may... I hope this answers the question, just being taught that family is important and then if it so happens to be a family member that violates you in any way you're just told to be quiet. It's changing nowadays, but I think it's a... I don't know. I think it's just keeping it quiet like it doesn't happen in our community kind of deal that's what's prevalent in the fact that number one, it does happen. There's a lot of sexual violations within family and a lot of times it's a family member; nine out of ten times really. I don't know the real number, but I would think so but there's that trust issue which is what's used by the perpetrator to manipulate the situation and the victim. In that case I could see the victim going to their parents and being like, "look this is what happened so and so who did it..." and then being told, "shut up you don't know what you're talking about that's not what happened." So I think that breaks the trust for that individual. I hope that answers the question.

Q: Yeah yeah that was fine, perfect. This next question is a little more personal so you can choose if you would like to continue and answer or skip. How has the silence about sexual violence and rape culture, but other issues as well affected you, how has that affected you?

A; Personally, I think it's affected me in a sense of my own identity. It's like our parents raise us to go good, to go to school, to do this, to take care of them when we're older and in that you kind of lose your culture because you have to be that one person. You know like I said earlier, in school I had to be one person and at home I was Samoan, but at

school you know you're palangi. I was just like, that made no sense and just at that was a struggle for me and it still is to differentiate just for myself and that's affected me in my own identity and vice versa too because I'm the youngest and so I'm not supposed to speak up, I'm not supposed to have an opinion even as old as I am now and though my siblings and I are all adults it's like, "no, you're still the baby," but that's not the case and I can definitely say about my siblings that my older sister wouldn't say or speak up in situations that I do... you know when it shouldn't be me... or in a sense an aunty or uncle say something because both of our parents passed away say something and I'd be like, "uh no. I'm grown, we're not in Samoa." My older sister would definitely not speak up but I would and in that sense it's a double edged sword you know.

Q: Alright that basically finishes up the first section dealing with taboo. We're going to move into rape culture and sexual violence. So to start off with, are you familiar with the term of rape culture?

A; Yeah, but when you say rape culture...maybe like when you know the words but when you put it in that aspect like maybe I don't know.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah I can just say the explanation that I have here.

Narrator: I'm like, " yeah sure, uh - huh. I just didn't know it was called rape culture."

Interviewer: Yeah it's basically just what you touched on earlier. It's when it's like shut down in a home right so like it's an environment where it's normal... the sexual violence is normalized in order to maintain the respect for the perpetrator. It's basically any environment where social attitudes that normalize sexual assault and abuse and victim blaming.

Narrator: Yeah, yeah it's so true. It's just like.. so what they're... you know I guess if it was a person that was religious or someone high in the church I don't care. They still did this to me and still it's wrong.

Q: Yeah yeah so to follow up, do you think sexual violence asnd rape has affected the Samoan/Pacific Island practiced and beliefs?

A: I mean I can only speak from personal experience only because... I just keep to myself, but I can see how it would be because then I know in my case you have family members that live with you. That's just a thing like most palangi don't do that. They don't have family members that come live with them, maybe for a short period of time but our short time is completely different from theirs. So in that sense I can see it changing to where people wouldn't be allowed to come and live with a certain family, when that's usually always been done like, " yeah we're gonna have so and so come live with us while they try their own place." Mind you the victim can be in the home and the perpetrators can be just one of those moving in. On the one part the family can just be like, "well suck it up," and where it would be affected would be, yeah no you can't. Even though we don't talk about it, your whoever abused my child or someone in my native family and I just don't, I don't feel comfortable having that person in my home... So I think that would affect it.

Q: And then do you think it's different when it comes to the treatment of women alongside our cultural beliefs?

Narrator: As if something were to happen or just as a whole?

Interviewer: Yeah if were to happen like that

A: I would think so because one I don't think that the male perpetrator and a male victim would speak up because that's even more shameful. I think it would affect that to where the women, we can be asked, "Well what did you do?" Well you can't really do anything if you're sleeping or you know for example if you're the one in the shower and that person walks in on you like that's not your fault. It's just things like that. I think it's definitely different between men and women.

Q: Yeah yeah. So this question is misplaced and a little different, but what are your thoughts or feelings when it comes to Pacific Islander women and their bodies and their sexuality?

A: Oh... I don't know cause that's like two different things in my eyes, your body and your sexuality in the sense that someone might say one thing because of your body and another thing because of your sexuality. Where... I don't know I'm not tryna make it complicated, I'm just tryna think through my thoughts here.

Interviewer: No you're good sorry you can talk about either or whatever you feel.

Narrator: It just makes me think of the third gender like if someone were to come out, like for me I'm bisexual and I am currently and have been in a relationship with a female for the last... oh my gosh it'll be fourteen years this summer so body wise I can only relate to the sense of, like I thinking of dancing, and I think of how we sit, and how we're told to if we walk in front of people excuse ourselves and not to do anything, not to dress in a way that's provocative so that people don't look at us. Where in reality we should be able to dress however the hell we want but that's not how we're taught and then when it comes to sexuality, I think about my parents. It kind of took them a little bit, it was one of

those they knew but they didn't want to say anything about my relationship. So as far as sexuality I think, I think it's whatever's convenient for the family like my parents love, love love love my partner just love her and she'd do anything for them and I think it's a sense of convenience like if it was the other way around if I was in relationship with a female that they didn't like then they wouldn't approve of my sexuality. I don't know, I think it's funny cause to this day I have siblings that, I have a home, I have a family with my partner meaning I have fur dogs, we don't have any human babies, but it's like they don't want to admit. I'm always like, "People it's fine like whatever it's fine, whatever makes it easier to swallow I don't care but this is who I am and they know me." If they ask me right out I will be truthful and it's like they don't want to know the truth and if I tell em they'll be like, "oh my gosh you are in a relationship with her." And you're dumb because you have seen us in our home. I think it's just a thing of convenience honestly and what they can get out of it.

Interview: yeah and you can even categorize sexuality as another taboo topic as well.

Narrator: yeah definitely like you could see, but I don't know if you know much about the Samoan culture with the fafafines [refers to the third gender in Samoan culture, normally a biological male who identifies as a woman] and how that's more accepted then if it was the other way around, if it was a female that have male tendencies that more even though it's not the right word butch of masculine like they wouldn't be able to bring home their femlae partner. It's not as accepting as if your brother was in a relationship with a fafine like it's weird and I'm just like, "It's the same thing. Just on the opposite ends of the spectrum," but no you can't do that.

Q; Thank you, so the next one is do you think that the silence around sexual violence impacts Pacific Islanders mental health and well being and how so?

A: Oh definitely it affects them in many ways and how they'll react if something like that was to happen in their own family also the acceptance of it of that's how they, you know if they went that route they're like, "Oh we don't talk about it. Even though we don't talk about it, it's okay just don't say anything." And if you don't talk about it then it didn't happen, but you continue that vicious cycle of, yes but it did happen and we need to talk about this because you don't know how that person's feeling. You don't know how it's affected them mentally you know whether or not they feel like, "oh my gosh it's my fault," when in reality it wasn't. You know so they go through their life thinking these things and not getting the correct help and to understand that you know you didn't do anything wrong and it's okay things happen, let's move forward, don't blame yourself, and it's a constant, " you didn't do anything wrong, don't worry you didn't do anything wrong." That the same mentality that's being passed onto the next generation... or you could look at like that person doesn't want to go on and have a family or just, there's so many different levels, or that person turns around and becomes a perpetrator themselves because hey it's okay, nobody talks about it. You know when it happened to me this is what's happened, so it's gonna be the same thing nothing's gonna happen to me.

Q: This question goes along with this next question, do you think it's connected to generational trauma?

Narrator: Definitely.

Interviewer: Yeah you kind of answered this too.

A: Yeah most definitely. They deal with, we all deal with different things because of our different generations just in growing up in different times you have to deal with different things and the trauma, even though it can be the same as far as like sexual violence in the home or even domestic violence, you're still dealing with different stress outside of the home so whatever's allowed or acceptable within society within that time can be completely different.

Q: Yeah yeah. So I wanted to talk about different specific stories that were already popular in the Pacific Island community, so are you familiar with Eleni 'Iongi and her story or when she came out and talked about her own experience?

A: No.

Interviewer: Okay to it was about two years ago in December of 2020, she had posted a live video talking about coming out with her rape story and then mentioning other girls who were also there and are now survivors of sexual violence because of that night as well. She created this upsurge of other, she is Tongan so she mostly impacted the Tongan community and this upsurge of other Tongan girls came out with their own stories and she kind of like opened a door for Tongan to talk about rape culture and sexual violence. However, they often found them being doubted or told to be quiet, and bringing shame to the family and all of that. So just based on this overview that I've given you about this story, what are your thoughts on how she went about addressing her experience and then how the community reacted? And if you have any other experiences that you would like to share that kind of relates to her as well, you can go ahead and talk about that too.

A: Oh good for her. It's funny when you said she did it on social media in my head I'm thinking, "oh yeah" cause I don't have any social media, I refuse to have any social media because people already think they know people's business. They only know what they think they know and you just make things up and they see... you know... you know what I mean. You can't post anything without hurting anybody else's feelings like I've seen it and I'm just like, we don't need a a worldwide platform to air our dirty laundry if you use it in a matter that is negative, but at the same time maybe she felt that that was her only outlet because no one was listening, nobody would hear her and with this day and age that that would be the best way to come out and say something then I think, or maybe I think she did that because it was easier to speak to the world than ti was to speak to her family, even though that sounds really sad. It's kind of like, If I put it out there it's done, everybody can watch this video and least I'm not gonna get beat up right away." I Don't know, but yeah good her and it's sad that people are telling her to be quiet or even those who have come right out for her because you always run the chance of those who just want attention and are gonna jump on the bandwagon and they make it bad for those who it actually happened to, but that shouldn't deter the victims to continue and tell their story to strength the upcoming generation to say, "Speak up it's not okay. It's not okay to be violated in your own home, it doesn't matter who the person is, or what their title is, or how much money they have, it doesn't matter." So yeah good for her.

Q; What are some of the reactions they you have seen when other Pacific Islanders share their experience as a survivor of sexual violence?

A: Sadness I know it depends on who it is. I know within my family those who have decided to share any story with me, most of them I should say all of them, yup all of them were blamed as being the victim, which to me is sad. I think for the parents dealing with it, that they didn't have the tools to be deal with it and so that's why they felt that way not that I'm making an excuse for them or anything , it's just how this are, but it was always the person's fault that was the victims and so i think it's sad in the reaction you wanna tell your story, but at the same time you can't control how the persons going to act or react with that pr how they treat how. I guess it just depends, I'm just all like, "it's sad, it's sad."

Q: Yeah yeah definitely. So when people come to you, I know mentioned some people have come out to you about their experiences with sexual violence, what are your responses to them? And would you change your reaction to any of the situations where survivors of sexual violence and/or rape culture have come to you?

A: I think it's gotten better over the years just cause when one of my cousins first told me and then one of my sisters I was just kind of like, "oh my gosh! It happened to you too?" It's not something you talk about and then you try to play back at least for me, I've gotten to the point where I just apologize and say, "I'm so sorry that happened to you. That really sucks and more especially at the fact that there was no support." And throughout the years you feel like you can't really defend yourself, but you can't really do that because people are starting to think what they want to think. I know my reaction is more of the just listening and apologizing, not because I did anything wrong but because it

happened to them. I feel sorry, not feel sorry but just be sorry that that's one of the experiences that they had to experience in their life.

Q: Yeah yeah. So thinking back on those times when they have decided to share with you, you wouldn't change anything about how that whole situation went or your grateful that it went that way so it was like a learning experience?

A: I don't think I would change anything just because you're already in the moment and it could come off of... I know one time it was just we were sitting there having a chat and then something came up that brought back a traumatic experience for them and then they felt the need to tell me and they even said that like, "I don't know why cause I've never told anybody this," and so I just sit there and I'm like, "wow thanks for trusting that you could share that experience with me," and I'm grateful in the fact that they felt comfortable to verbalize it cause even then, that's a challenge in itself to admit that something like that happened. So no I wouldn't change anything in the way I acted or what I said in those situations.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah thank you for that.

Narrator: No worries

Q: So we're gonna kind of shift to talking about how our culture, as Pacific Islanders you know Tongan and Samoan culture and how that can help to address this issue in our community. You know this issue is still very prevalent in Pacific Island families, so what are some examples that you have seen of Pacific Islanders trying to address sexual violence in a positive way?

A: I haven't seen any examples. I don't know if it's because I'm not in with social media or I don't really like to read the news or anything but I don't know what's really out there that people are using to help the situation... yeah so I haven't seen anything, not to say that there isn't anything going on but I don't know.

Q: Do you have any personal experiences that you can share that was a healthy supportive interaction between you and your family or you and another Pacific Islander?

A: Sadly no.

Interviewer: Aw I'm so sorry.

Narrator: No I haven't, I mean the only positive I can think of was actually telling one of my male cousins and him just being really productive of me. You know because you still run into people when you have family functions so that's really the only thing that was supportive for me, but outside of society wise I couldn't tell you.

Interviewer: Yeah I'm so sorry that you haven't had a positive interaction.

Narrator: Yeah I know I mean even within the last... it's been a few years now, my sister and I we had gone back to Samoa for a family funeral and you can clearly see I had to point it out to her, in one of the pictures that my cousin's husband had put his hand on my butt. I was just like, "What the? Ew!" Everybody's like smiling in the picture and I pointed out to my sister, "you see my face?" She's like, "Why aren't you smiling? And I was like, "he has his hand on my butt," and she's like, "What?" And she just kind of laughed. She didn't didn't know how to react and this is my older sister; and I was like, "yeah at first I thought it like he doesn't know hand placement correctly like I don't know," and then we had taken another picture and I said, "look this is the second

picture,” and we had all walked away and somebody’s like, “wait wait wait wait,” and he did the same thing and I was so uncomfortable and I was like, “Are you effing kidding me? Dude you’re my cousin's husband! It doesn’t even matter that you’re her husband, you’re a male that I’m not involved with.” I was just like... wow and the fact that my sister was like, “ha - ha,” and shrugged it off she didn’t know what to say, I mean what’s she gonna say? That was awkward. I was just like, “Awesome. So glad I’m not going back there anytime soon.”

Q: Wow yeah... In response to Eleni ‘Iongi’s story and the upsurge in Pacific Islanders coming out with their own stories about about sexual violence, some of the responses have been negative some also tried to combat rape culture with cultural values. So in Tongan culture we have a thing called, Faa’i Kavei Koula, which means *four core values/pillars*, which are faka’apa’apa, *respect*; anga fakatokilalo, *humility*; mamahi’i me’a, *loyalty*; and Tauhi Vaha’a, *building relationships*. So out of any of these values, which value(s) have you seen help you in your own life and experiences? Am I making sense?

Narrator: What’s the values again? Hold on, I have to write down the words or I’m gonna forget... as you’re telling me.

Interviewer: Sorry I can put it in the chat too.

Narrator: Oh okay.

Interviewer: So there’s respect, humility, loyalty, and building relationships. So those are the four values that we like to talk about in Tongan culture. So out of any of these values, or you can talk about all of them, have you seen any of these values combat rape culture, mental health, and sexual violence within the home?

A: I would say humility only because it takes a humble person to be able to one, admit that something like that has happened and become humble enough to share it and for the audience to be like, “oh wow.” Accept the fact that this really did happen and it didn’t just happen on TV in other families. And also respect, that mutual respect that you can respect the person speaking I think that just goes hand - in - hand with in. I hope that’s making sense, in my head it does.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah it does.

Narrator: I’m like in my head it does I don’t know if the words I’m saying are making sense to you.

Interviewer: No you’re good, thank you.

Narrator: You’re welcome.

Q: So next, you kind of already talked about this as well maybe you like choose maybe one value that you might feel that will help Pacific Islanders address rape culture and kind of help raise awareness of sexual violence within the home?

A: I would say building relationships. I think It’s important for parents to have a very close relationship with their kids so the kids can feel there’s trust and can go to them with anything. You know it’s one thing to say, “you can come tell me anything,” and then you go tell them something like this and then they don’t believe you. I think building that relationship will lead to one hundred percent trust between the two... because you know there’s always gonna be the two, you’re the child and they’re the adult kind of deal when it’s your parents and even the aunts and uncles sometimes. I know for me it was easier for me to speak to my own aunty rather than to my mom cause you feel more of that you know that their your friend, you can trust your friend

but I think that building that not just the parent - daughter relationship and vice versa, but still have that trust where they can still come and talk to you because if not who else are they gonna talk to?

Q: Alright this is the last question before we end, how can we as Pacific Islanders us own our cultural beliefs as a way of healing when it comes to sexual violencs?

A: The thing that comes into my head is family. You know we speak so highly of family but at the same time it's the same family that's hurting us, so to build of off family to understand that there's both a positive and negative that happens within the relationships. And just, not accept that it happens but know how to act or react if something like that does happen in the family so that you can remain a family unit and those relationships can be built upon whether it's... I wanna say built upon and I keep thinking victim - perpetrator that if in the future, they can get to a point where they feel comfortable enough to stay in the same room to respect that, but if they don't, to also respect that as well, because of family that's what we're taught. It's like, "oh but their family," and it's like okay that doesn't give them a right to do what they did and it doesn't give you the right to sweep it under the rug because you're my parent. So I really think in concentrating just as much as we do on the positive side of family and our names that we need to address the ugly side of it too... I hope that makes sense.

Interviewer: Yes yes thank you !

Narrator: I don't know, I'm interested to hear what other people say.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah. Thank you so much that concludes our interviewer

Narrator: You're welcome, glad I could help.