

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Transcript

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Transcribed by: Myra Fonceca

Introduction by Myra

Being in KTA (Kiribati and Tuvalu Association) and the Pacific Islands for UK in Ireland - this is a group set up in London and we all lived in London. My members are also made up of these expatriates that have been working in the Pacific. They retire and come home, so every year we meet somewhere, 'cos they like the food and the dancing girls.

Q. I lived as an expatriate and you never lose it or put it behind you, do you, and there is that connection straight away. We don't meet very often now.

They are getting old because the colonies are a long time ago now, so we try to address the young members who retire.

Q. People who enjoy the ex-pat life never quite lose it - it took me years to settle back into England, I found it very difficult, it's like an alien country you've come to.

Yes the old folks still dreaming of the Pacific or wherever. So we meet up once a year and have lunch somewhere in Dartmoor and find some dancing girls.

Q. Yes a vital part of your culture which we just don't have, do we?

No, that's why our group in Europe and here amalgamation, Polynesian and... We group together and get out together, dance, feast.

Q. You do get English dancing it still goes on in our village halls but most people don't come across it and it's all the older people who can do the old country dancing, but I don't think you ever find them in a city, it just doesn't exist, but I've watched the old farmers in our village and they get up and are as drunk as lords and do all these complicated dances and all the young ones tripping over their own feet which is quite nice. Do you go back - I know that you do, and what are your impressions when you go back?

I've just come back spent a month there this September. I went to be there when Prince William and Kate were there.

Q. Did you see them?

Yes, it was great, fantastic - they were dancing just like the local people.

Q. I also thought, where is home?

Home - well it's a bit difficult now because I seem to have three homes here, Hong Kong and of course Tuvalu.

Q. So did you originally go from Tuvalu to Hong Kong and then to England?

At the beginning? No, we were working in the colonies in those days so we'd been coming here since '66 and my husband is from here.

Q. He's English?

Yes.

Q. I wasn't sure because there are many English names in the islands aren't there?

In those days there were colonies, but nowadays independent. Peter was a District Commissioner on the island.

Q. I am reading a Joseph Conrad novel at the moment and I read lots of Somerset Maughan yes, it takes you right back to the pre-war really.

So he was there for four years.

Q. And that's where you met him?

Yes and we moved to work in Solomon Islands.

Q. And then Hong Kong?

And then he left the colony, they were beginning to cut down by then in the '60s and '70s - they were cutting down, lots of islands were becoming independent, so we came here and then went to Libya. He invested in Benghazi in Libya. They had just had the revolution by then. We arrived there and Gaddafi was there.

Q. Tremendous change, it was a period of great hope then wasn't it?

Yes, it was quite strange arriving there with blood on the streets. British Army kicked out, the French, the Italian, so the British community with the British Council was reduced to not many. So we were there for seven years.

Q. And then?

From there to Hong Kong, so that's where we are.

Q. And you like that? So you said that's where we are now, so you spend a lot of time.

Yes we spend a lot of time, we have property there in Hong Kong and he's still there. I am here with the children and family are over here. So I'm sort of travelling between.

Q. So you have, it's been lovely to hear about your family and what they are doing? Can you think of anything Ravi - I know you are a technician but I can't see there is any harm for you to ask questions.

Q. How did you find life changing from your base in Pacific Island to Libya and then to Hong Kong then here - how did you adjust?

It was very difficult the first time. Because when we moved from the island, Peter's parents lived in North Cornwall, Bude, so a big contrast.

Q. From a Pacific Island to Bude... slightly different beaches. Although that's sandy beaches there isn't it?

In Bude – yeah, they have surfing beaches there.

Q. I live on the south coast you see where we have pebbles, we don't have any sand.

Oh we have nice beaches in Bude.

Q. (Ravi) And did you find your life difficult, people accepting you socially or was it hospitable and accepted?

I think in those days in the '60s when I first arrived, they probably think I'm sort of royal, they haven't seen many immigrants, so they did accept me and respect me in Cornwall and of course Peter's family is a very well established family. But then that loneliness, you can't do this like we used to in the island, just get up and go.

Q. It was a much more formal society then.

Yes it's more confining to the home.

Q. More indoor life than outdoor?

Yes

Q. And what about the language barrier.

Yes the language was also a bit...because I didn't have much fluent English, but it went by, got by

Q. What are the local languages back home?

Polynesian language...Relatively the same as Maori, Tonga, Samoan

Q. So there are all dialects

Yes. But then of course we moved around all the time. We travel around, live in Libya, that was another strange, because the women dress...

Q. Did you find that difficult to adjust to?

Yes, we had to be careful because the revolution by then... I went to supermarket and the manager there told my husband to cover my face because I look like the sister of the king which had just been kicked out, King Idris

Q. Did you have any connection with the royal family then?

No, it was the way I looked! The British, French, Italian they all...

Q. It was such an international place before that wasn't it?

We would wait for my husband to come from work and then we'd go out shopping.

Q. So you couldn't really go out by yourself?

No.

Q. It must have been very lonely.

But we had the children, they go to international school next door, meet the other wives.

Q. So you did meet the expatriate wives?

Yeah

Q. You said you'd made some notes of what you would like to talk about?

Yeah well, it's the same sort of thing you are asking.

Q. Your experiences of travelling into different cultures.

Where do I come from, how I ended up here, any plan to go home

Q. You said you are retired now and you travel between – but if your family is in England I presume you envisage this to be your base.

My younger daughter was born in Hong Kong and she was deaf so when she was three years old I moved here so she can go to the Topsham Deaf School down there.

Q. and was that good for her?

Yes, she stayed there, finished, went to University. Now she's married with two children, just had her birthday yesterday, 32.

While she was in school I was here by myself with the other half of my family in Hong Kong.

Q. So you brought her here by yourself?

Yes.

Q. Did you work?

I went to work in a charity shop, managed it for five years: CLIC - Cancer Leukaemia in Children in Bedford St. It was a new charity then, so the shop in Exeter was the first shop.

Then I went to travel again, I left it and came back and got a job in the Co-op just down there, the corner shop.

Q. So did you get to know people or not really?

I did get to know people being a charity shop. And here I've been working at the Co-op for a period.

Q. Do you still work there?

No I retired three years ago.

Q. Shall we start the interview now? Have you had it on - from the beginning?

So we'll just go through again so that you can say its right as to when did you come to England and how did you come to be here and was it a long journey?

I came from the island called Funafuti one of Tuvalu's island in the Pacific between Fiji and Hawaii to the east of Solomon Islands.

Q. and did you come from a large family?

Yes I am the eldest of 7 children with my father and mother. My family actually come from Samoa, my ancestors. They sailed from Samoa on one of these catamarans, a very long way.

Q. And do you know when they arrived in Tuvalu?

I can't say, long before the British arrived in these islands.

Q. And does your family all still live there?

Yeah my brother is there. I just came back. He sort of encouraged me to come home. He works for the United Nations, just retired so at the moment he is very busy now sorting out all sorts of things.

Q. What does the UN do there?

They have offices in Fiji, that's where he works. They have to cover the whole of the Pacific islands.

Q. Is the UN involved in the problem of rising sea levels?

Yeah they do, but mostly there are scientists there setting up studying, monitoring. The Taiwanese - helping with trying to plant trees or make a sea wall to hold the sand. And the Japanese, yeah quite a few of them out there too.

Q. You were saying your sister-in-law is building her own defences.

Yeah all along there they build a sea wall, just about anything they can throw on. It doesn't work when the tide is really high - it comes right up to her house and plants.

Q. Has it always been like that?

No, not when I grew up, this is just recent. It's very noticeable.

Q. Has the weather been noticeably different?

Sunshine, when it gets to king tides. They had a drought for 6 months, no rain at all. But they catch the rainfall in water tanks. Every family has one. They've a good water system, provided by the European Union.

Q. So you met your husband and fell in love.

We got married in the '60s in Funafuti and then we moved to work in Solomon Islands as I said. He was the District Commissioner on Ellice Islands for four years. He left Cambridge and went straight to the colonial service that's why he ended up in Gilbert and Ellice islands. His family from here is from Devon and he went to school near Tiverton, Blundell's - his uncles went there. Then to Cambridge. His grandfather was vicar of Parracombe. His grandmother is the daughter of Henry Spurrier, the founder of Leyland, which is now British Leyland now.

Q. So he went from Blundell's to...which college?

He went to Cambridge - Pembroke

Q. And into the colonial office...was Tuvalu his first posting?

No, he was posted to Gilbert, then it was Gilbert and Ellice islands, the capital was Tarawa in the Gilberts, that's where he went first, and also worked in Malaya and then we ended up in Solomon Islands.

Q. And then there were cutbacks?

When there were cutbacks we came to England and then found a post in the university in Libya.

Q. What did he teach?

He taught English as a foreign language.

Q: what were your impressions of post Revolution Libya?

It was very strange because there are lots of restrictions for us women to move around. We also had to be careful that we are not staring at anything. At that time they were still kicking out people, just get 24 hours to leave Libya. But we survived for 7 years.

Q. It was an isolating life but you had a young family by then?

I had my kids they were young then and grew up in Libya and went to International School next door. Just be careful to not upset anything. We've been asked what do we think of Gaddafi, and I said he's really handsome.

Q. There were great hopes that he was going to do wonderful things, I think he started to, didn't he?

Yes he did start off well.

Q. (Ravi) Well Gaddafi and General Idi Amin of Uganda had the same sort of political agenda. We were all expelled from Uganda in 1972. After we left I heard that Amin invited so many Libyans, the Libya Bank to run the Commerce itself in Uganda.

We lived quite luxury in Libya - during that time.

Q. (Ravi) Life for diplomats and colonial officers was quite luxurious. Wherever they went, they had their own colonial residences as well as their clubs and private schools, same as in Uganda. Everyone had their own swimming and tennis clubs.

Yes it was like that in Libya.

Q. (Ravi) I'd like to take you back home, can you tell me, how big was the population of the island that you came from?

When I left school I remember the censor came to our house at that time, by then it was still the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. And my island, Funafuti was the capital of the Ellice Islands. The population was only 700, very small.

Q. Did it produce any food or crops?

Copra (kernel of coconut) - the ship comes round and collects the copra then they take it to Samoa.

Q. Did it develop after that after your school days?

No, not until they separated from Gilbert and then the government moved in to develop it.

Q. So how were things then and now - has it modernised, good communication systems?

Yes, it's good, Shipping, they've got their own ships. Things were good then but terrible now, too many people on these small islands

Q. Overpopulated?

Yes, you can't move.

Q. I read over 4½ thousand. It's true - I was a little suspicious that the island could support that many.

It's true – yeah very crowded.

Q. What would you put the reason for the expansion of population from 700 to 4½ thousand. Is it the good lifestyle or the climate or resources?

Well, it's the people's fault, because they have 8 islands - people from the other islands just move in to Funafuti. But there are other islands which I have been travelling around this last time, they live in those times when I was grew up - people have their own house, big gardens front and back, their own plantation. But on Funafuti everybody just lives crowded together.

Q. Who do you think has the better life?

I think those on the other islands.

Q. It does need a whole new mindset doesn't it if it becomes too crowded?

Lots of them in Tuvalu moved to New Zealand and Australia.

Q. Do they have problems moving, visa requirements, entry requirements?

Well they have these systems, New Zealand has been allowing people to go and work in NZ like fruit picking, or working farms.

Q. What about Australia?

Australia is just starting now. Solomon Islands and Tonga, but also Gilberts and Tuvalu.

Q. Is Cayman island one of the group islands?

That is in the Caribbean...The thing is people just wanted to go to New Zealand, they go on these projects and don't come back.

Q. Can we go back to Libya? Did you leave with regret?

No I think because we'd been there 7 years, our children were ready to go to secondary school. So we decided to change, put them in boarding school, but at the same time Peter got a job in Hong Kong at the university... polytechnic.

Q. So did your son go to Blundell's?

No. They went to an international school in Hong Kong.

Q. Hong Kong - good fun isn't it? I love it, its crazy but it's good.

Yes, we arrived in '76/'77 - it was crowded but it wasn't as bad as now.

Q. No that was still the world of Suzie Wong, wasn't it? Before all the high rise.

There's no space left - it's really terrible now. But then the weather is nice.

Q. So how many children have you got?

Three - all went to school in Hong Kong. My youngest daughter was born in Hong Kong and she's deaf, so I came over. She was about 3 or 4.

Q. at Topsham, did she board?

Day student.

Q. Does this mean you have mastered sign?

Yes, I sign, I took up lessons at the school. They taught parents, yeah it was a good school.

Q. (Ravi) They call themselves West of England Academy for the Deaf. We were visiting that school many years ago and the children were lovely, beautiful. They always treated us very nicely. I think it's a very good school.

Yes, Elizabeth was there until she finished school. Went to college here and then University at Huddersfield

Q. What did she do?

Fine Art

Q. And this is her work?

No those are mine, but she does paint - more than me.

Q. So you're an artist as well.

Yes.

Q. So that means she gets her talent from you. These are stunning, and the jugs? Did you train as an artist?

I just learn as I go along. I finished that just before I went to Australia - I've got to get it framed.

Q. Do you mind if we took a photo of it?

Not at all

Q. It's just so full of spring, the summer, a lovely feeling. So did you go to Hong Kong in the school holidays, or was that too much to manage?

Yes, go for holidays.

Q. Being in Hong Kong - presumably you had help there to look after the children?

Yes, Filipina maids and things like that. But they also went to boarding school here so I sort of travelled between.

Q. (Ravi) so you've been globe trotting all the time, not settled in one place?

Q. How do you feel about that in retrospect? I travelled a lot but I think it has left me unsettled. Did it have an effect on you?

In a way I think it does, the children as well, moving them around. But I suppose it's why I don't settle, I sort of travel between places. But I got used to it.

Q. And you become very good at packing!

Yes, get the children ready for boarding school. And now I've got my grandchildren - 5 grandchildren - 3 boys and 2 girls.

Q. And they visit?

My eldest granddaughter is in Hong Kong with grandpa - she's teaching English in kindergarten and studying at the same time for a higher degree in Hong Kong - so she stays with grandpa, keeping an eye on grandpa as well.

She is 23 now, Amanda...My grandson is just finishing school and going to college next door, he's sixteen this year and three little ones, it's good fun. That is why I feel that Exeter is more like home now, because of the kids, the family.

Q. So go back - when you first came to Britain you said your in-laws were very welcoming and accepting, but what were your impressions of England, it must have been such a shock.

It was dreadful, it was so cold. But then of course we travelled, it took us a whole month to come from the island, from Tuvalu, Fiji, Tahiti, Mexico, and Caribbean to Canary Islands. By the time we got here it was the middle of November in 1967. And then we went back to Libya for a stay of about a year. It was difficult. Because my parents-in-law pack up and go to work in Libya, so it was just us in the family home with 2 kids. Very small village and just the basics to survive, there is a post office come shop in the square, one pub, one bakery, most thing is delivered, fishermen come and delivered. That was the highlight!

Q. What did you think of English food?

I like it, but I did miss my old food then in those days, 'cos you can't get anything like that in those days. I remember the missionary of the island retired and he lives up in London, came to visit me and brought breadfruit from London. It was the first time I saw a breadfruit in England, it was nice. But now it is quite plentiful, we've got Indian shops down the road here.

Q. So you weren't working in those days because you had the children?

I had the children.

Q. What about the general culture, did you have televisions, a pop music scene in Tuvalu?

Yes in fact we had one cinema. When I left school I started a family cinema which was the first cinema on the island at the age of 17.

Q. Where did your films come from?

From Suva, they sent it over; the plane comes once a week. We played 3 films over and over again until the next lot comes.

Q. Indoors, outdoors?

Indoors, we just put some tarpaulins around the big hall and we collect the money. That was my first job when I left school.

Q. How long did it last?

It was still going when I left. I got married and came over. Yes, lots of music, island nights - played European music.

Q. So did musical entertainment here seem strange, good, bad?

Oh yes totally strange. I wasn't that outgoing...I had 3 kids to bring up so my social life seemed nil, but yes it was quite an eye opening to see other cultures.

Q. Because you have worked around the world so much, your island group must be a stability in your life?

Yes it goes back to my roots, there are quite a lot of us around.

Q. Roughly how many when you meet up?

Hundreds, because they are all like me they are married and they come with their kids and camp around.

Q. You must have made friendships over those years?

Yes, quite a lot of them in Europe, Germany and France.

Q. They go for work?

Yeah, they work.

Q. Going back to these rugby players who come over – I won't say it's unique to Exeter Chiefs, but it is a feature of the Exeter Rugby scene isn't it that they regularly have the players come over. Do you think they would be interested in this project in any way of talking to us about how they feel? We hear about the footballers who come over all the time, but they live in a different kind of world.

Well I could talk to them.

Q. It would be another strand in this story.

But there are other families from you know from Papua New Guinea - do you have any people from there?

Q. in Exeter, not that I know of...do you know any Ravi?

Q. (Ravi) that's what I was going to ask you, how many people from the other islands are in Devon or in Exeter, could you tell us about them?

There's a girl from Gilbert Islands who lives in Brixham - I often see her. Another girl from Gilbert Islands lives in Topsham, but they are right now in the Gilbert Islands, they work there. There is a Papua New Guinean in Crediton. Solomon Islanders down in Plymouth.

Q. Do you have a sort of club or association of these islanders that you meet and talk about your culture?

Yes we do, once a year, I haven't organised because I retired from there and I've been away too long travelling around, but they meet once a year in England or Belgium or Germany or France. It takes one person to organise it and then they all go there.

Q. What about the local Devonians - here we have our different immigrant communities they've got their own associations like Indians and Muslims have got a mosque down the road, and they try and maintain their own identity or culture by meeting or celebrating various festivals. Do you have such an organisation or do you celebrate anything?

No not here.

Q. It would be interesting to know what festivals they have back home and what cultural activities you do celebrate.

They celebrate Christmas, they celebrate...like my island were bombed in the last war [Second World War] where the Americans were, you know, they came and prepared their attack on the islands of Japan.

Q. So you celebrate the end of that?

Yes some people died, got killed during that bombing, so I really hope they celebrate.

Q. Did the Japanese occupy the islands – they just bombed?

No - they occupied, Tarawa group, the Gilbert Islands

Q. They left yours alone?

But the Americans were based on Tuvalu, based on my islands.

Yes, that's one of the celebrations they do.

Q. (Ravi) Can you tell us... I know these islands have a very rich indigenous culture, the culture, what they celebrated, before you mentioned the colonisation of the original people, would you like to say something?

They do that on some other group of islands; they celebrate their own past before Christians arrived on the islands.

Q. (Ravi) that's very interesting too

Celebrating the 'Whales Day' where they do that on the 7th January. They just celebrate and get together...

Q. (Ravi) and what happens on the day? How do they celebrate it?

Big feast, dancing, lots of speeches, some elderly will get up and tell stories. Also the day the Christians arrived there, they celebrate that too.

Q. So there were only about 700 people when you were young. I imagine the Christians would have pretty much stomped out any local...

Yes that's right.

Q. Was there a religion as such that had a name prior to Christianity?

I heard that my ancestors worshipped the sun, maybe like the Druids here...but that was all stamped out when the missionaries arrived.

Q. (Ravi) is there anything you would like to tell us on your own accord?

I'd just like to say that during my chairperson in the group, through there we fix up the twinning of Great Dunmow with Tuvalu and also Staffordshire Council twinned with Tuvalu.

Q. Do you know the story about Great Dunmow?

A side of bacon can be claimed by any couple who have not had a fight in the last year and they have to prove it.

End of interview.