

Research Summary

Minorities in the minority: Cook Islands Māori and the Pasifika umbrella category

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Pasifika umbrella category

In only a few years, public institutions have favoured the term Pasifika as an umbrella category for more than 380,000 people living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Pasifika has a purpose: irrespective of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, it sweeps together eight percent of the country on the premise that this sub-population claims ancestry from different Pacific Islands states and territories in the Pacific region. Pasifika has backers: New Zealand citizens working in the education and health sectors, even in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, apply this classification over New Zealand's Pacific population. Explicitly, Pasifika points to Pacific generations born in New Zealand who outnumber their migrant grandparents or parents, aunts, and uncles born in Pacific Islands states and territories. Because of Pasifika's New Zealand-ness, it is assumed people bunched into this category cannot be called Pacific Islanders. Instead, they are named Pasifika, an islander-sounding made-up transliteration of Pacific.

The more forceful public institutions become about using the Pasifika category in public-facing communication and demographic data, the more likely it is that the minorities in the minority grouping of Pacific generations born in New Zealand will become invisible in the public eye. As an 'Avaiki Nui Māori postgraduate in Te Ara Poutama, a faculty centred on Māori and Indigenous research approaches at Auckland University of Technology, my research focuses on my people living in Aotearoa. That is, descendants of Manihiki, Rakahanga, and Aitutaki as well as Māori Kūki 'Āirani descendants of other populated islands that make up the Cook Islands: Atiu, Mauke, Mitiaro, Mangaia, Rarotonga, Avarau (Palmerston), Te Nuku o Ngalewa (Nassau), Pukapuka, and Tongareva (Penrhyn).

Minorities in the minority

The identity term minorities has a different meaning to Indigenous peoples. These two categories, minorities and Indigenous, should not be confused as the same identity, which the current predicament of Pasifika in Aotearoa being promoted as Indigenous has done (Mafile'o and Walsh-Tapiata, 2007). Not only is Pasifika a designation for New Zealand born Pacific peoples, but the cultures associated with various Pacific ethnicities born in New Zealand are strikingly different to the cultures of peoples living in Pacific states and territories. For these reasons, Pasifika is not an Indigenous identity.

The reality is Indigenous peoples, such as ngā iwi Māori (Māori tribes), embody the familial descendants of peoples who were the original inhabitants of lands forcibly taken over and colonised by colonial settlers. Over time, descendants of colonial settlers have become the dominant population, language, and culture on Indigenous lands who enjoy a greater share of power over the political system, economy, and resources. Contrastingly, Pasifika represents various ethnic minorities living in New Zealand who have been conflated within this umbrella category for the purpose of constructing a mass minority grouping.

The United Nations Human Rights Council stipulates that although there is no one-size-fits-all definition for who is a minority among their 193 member states, the international human rights system “recognizes the term ‘minority’ as an ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural group, fewer in number than the rest of the population, whose members share a common identity and rights” (UNHRC, 2024). In an Aotearoa context, the “rest of the population” who make up the majority signifies Pākeha New Zealanders (UNHRC, 2024).

The points to remember are firstly, ethnic minorities integrated into the Pasifika umbrella category do not share the same culture. My people, Cook Islands Māori, are not the same culture and language as Samoans, Tongans, or any other ethnicity imagined to be Pasifika. Secondly, Article 27 of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights determines the rights of minorities in an international framework (United Nations, 1966).

In those States in which ethnic, religious, or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language (United Nations, 1966).

In many ways, the Pasifika identity marker has caused significant cultural disconnection overlooked by public institutions. There are ethnic minorities within this minority umbrella category whose rights to be in their own community, “enjoy their own culture,” and “use their own language” are not prioritised (United Nations, 1966). But why has this situation come

about? Largely because the dominant ethnic groups in the Pasifika arrangement define who and what is Pasifika in New Zealand. As a consequence, Cook Islands Māori have been made a minority inside Pasifika; a minority instructed on how to be Pasifika by other ethnicities. My point is, we are not culturally other people with ancestry from other states and territories in the Pacific region. Why should we be compelled to become another culture and language when we have our own?

Given this contextual background, the heart of my postgraduate research in the Master of Arts in Māori development presents a twofold critical inquiry. Firstly, the research examines the perspectives of Cook Islands Māori enrolled in New Zealand universities regarding their location and dislocation within the Pasifika umbrella category (Webb, 2022). Secondly, I am analysing how the cultural politics of Pasifika location and dislocation impacts on identity configurations of Māori Kūki 'Āirani enrolled in New Zealand universities (Anderson, 2015; Hooper, 1961). In particular, I want to find out whether or not Pasifika acts as a structural form of cultural displacement prompting Avaiki Nui Māori to build closer and safer relationships with ngā whānau Māori (Aotearoa Māori kinfolk and communities) in university settings (Bremer, 2020; Puna and Tiatia-Seath, 2017).

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Biography

Brandon Ulfsby (see Figure 1) is tangata Manihiki, Rakahanga, and Aitutaki with genealogical connections to Mangaia and Mitiaro in 'Avaiki Nui (Cook Islands), and Reao and Tahiti in Mā'ohi Nui (French Polynesia). He is a journalist and communications advisor for the Office of the Vice-Chancellor at AUT. Brandon is undertaking a Master of Arts in Māori development in Te Ara Poutama.



Figure 1. Brandon Ulfsby, an 'Avaiki Nui (Cook Islands) Māori and Mā'ohi postgraduate researcher in Te Ara Poutama.

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