

Interview with
KUKI MOTUMOTU TUIASOSOPO

October 21, 2020

**THE PANDEMIC YEARS: COVID-19
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

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KUKI MOTUMOTU TUIASOSOPO

Kuki Motumotu Tuiasosopo was interviewed by Anasitasia “Ana” Vaitele on October 21, 2020 via Zoom. Kuki was speaking from his office at the American Samoa Community College in Mapusaga, American Samoa. Due to American Samoa having no positive COVID-19 cases, Kuki was able to talk about his experience and the changes that he experienced as the island of American Samoa’s borders were shut down from everyone outside.

AV: So, it’s recording right now, so let me start our interview. This is Anasitasia Vaitele and it is October 21st, 2020. We are having this interview via Zoom.

So, can you please state your full name and spell them out for me?

KT: My name is Kuki Motumotu Tuiasosopo, spells K-U-K-I, that’s my first name. Middle name spells M-O-T-U-M-O-T-U. And my last name spells T-U-I-A-S-O-S-O-P-O.

AV: Okay, thank you. So, Kuki, where is your location right now?

KT: I’m speaking via Zoom from my office at the American Samoa Community College, located on the island of Tutuila in American Samoa.

AV: ’Kay. And when were you born—

KT: [Inaudible.]

AV: Okay. And when were you born and where?

KT: I was born in American Samoa. In Faga’alu Hospital LBJ Tropical Medical Center in Faga’alu on November 30, 1972.

AV: Okay, so the whole meaning of this interview is pertaining to the COVID-19 virus and how it is affecting the world we are living in today, and right now I want to focus on the American Samoa islands.

So, what do you, first, what do you think of the COVID-19 virus right now? Do you have any thoughts about it?

KT: I think it’s a— Well, I’ve been, in the beginning of the COVID, of when it was called a pandemic, I’ve been looking, researching online what it was all about. And I’ve been following several researches done by, not done by the news network, not from them, but from alternative news media. And based on the stories I’ve been, I’ve been following that this COVID-19 disease, it was a man-made disease. It was first found in China, in Wuhan, China and then everything started to spread from there. And I think it went to Italy, and then from Italy spread all over Europe. And then it got its way to America and it’s all over the world. That’s what, that’s just a brief summary of what I, what I’ve been reading about.

- AV: Okay, so when you first heard about the virus, how did you feel? Were you scared or nervous or—?
- KT: I wasn't nervous, it wasn't, at the time, it wasn't the most important thing. Because at the time when it was first discovered, I think it was first discovered back in November, it wasn't really a big deal. When we first started. When it first started, in the beginning of the year, when it became evident that it had spread to America, at that time, to me, I read about it. I was aware, but I was too busy with my father's funeral. You know what I'm saying? So, it wasn't, it wasn't an important thing to me. At the time— It was um—
- AV: It was something you didn't think about it heavily. Like, you didn't even think that it was gonna be a serious—
- KT: It wasn't an important thing. It wasn't an important thing to me at the time because, you know, there were other important issues for me, but— I think it was, when it was called, when it was pronounced pandemic, it was right after my dad's funeral.
- AV: I see. So, before it started, like, what was your usual schedule before the pandemic started, what were you doing at the time? Like, before it got serious?
- KT: Well, our regular routine. My regular routine was just coming to work. Teaching, the usual thing that a college professor would do, right? It would be, you know, at the beginning of semester we had a faculty orientation week, which also included the students' registration and that. We started our regular semester. It was around, I think it was, if I can remember this correctly, I think it was in mid-March when the campus was locked down. Oh, and then we had to transfer everything. All the teachings we had to transfer everything virtually and that's what it was.
- AV: And you guys were still going to church on Sundays and having regular activities?
- KT: Yeah. Yes, that came in later. What happened was when, with us here in American Samoa, the good thing is that we have the Department of Homeland Security. So, they've been following all the things that was happening in the mainland and the Governor had organized a task force to deal with this of been pandemic. So, before it was announced globally as a pandemic, the government has already formed a task force group to kind of, to kind of, deal with this situation. And then so, there were numerous announcements out from the governor's office, about the disease, the COVID-19, before it was announced a pandemic. For example, we were in, we were in code blue before it was a pandemic. At school here on campus, we were already practicing social distancing and using hand sanitizers and using masks before it was announced as a pandemic. So, when everything— So, when we came to the point where we had to lockdown, we had already three weeks in advance of practicing social distancing. So, the first thing that was went into effect was schools. I think, I believe the governor and the government officials were, they prioritized school to be shut down. And the second thing they moved into was curfews, I think the curfews at the time was six o'clock. All the businesses were to close at six o'clock. And then there were to be no church services. And no large gatherings of more than 50 people. And so, we kind of started off like that on this island, yeah.

AV: So, you guys started out pretty early, just trying to like—

KT: Yeah, we—

AV: The government reacted early.

KT: Yeah, we moved on it early. With, you know. We moved on it early and things were in place before the shutdown, I mean. So, I think our lockdown was around the same time the mainland was locked down.

AV: So, let's focus on your life. Like, how has your life changed ever since the pandemic started? What are some of the things that you usually did that changed ever since the pandemic started and the shutdown started in American Samoa?

KT: Okay, well family life?

AV: Mm-hmm.

KT: It was good. I think for me, and I would probably say for other people, other Samoans. I think— And I don't want to say just Samoans. I think for people who value family time, I think the pandemic was a good time for family. I mean, what I mean, I think the lockdown was a good time for family to come together because we, all the kids were at the house now because you can't go out, you know, not going to school, McDonald's was closed, the restaurants were closed at night. So, we, so every family had, for seven days a week, had dinner together, had breakfast together. There were a lot of family time spending together during that lockdown. Even during church on Sunday, we had church services online, and everybody was in the living room or at the dinner table worshipping together. You know, it was a good time and that's what I, you know, in our family, we had a good time.

AV: Yeah, well church is a very important thing back home, especially family. So, seeing the social media displaying, like, the church services, did it come as a surprise to you that even though we did not go to church, we were still, you guys were still wearing your formal puletasis, like your formal wears during the time?

KT: For us, you know, it— like I said, it was a good, it was worshipping together, but we were watching it. You know, the only people that were allowed to go to the temple or to the sanctuary, the church building, was the pastor or the priest and the person that does the video, right? The live, usually these live services would be done on Facebook, okay. So, and then, you know, it's live and then we would be sitting at home on our dinner table, you know, by the dinner table and just watching the [Facebook]Live. It was a bit strange to have a service like that. It's not the same way, it's not the same when you actually worship at the church, right?

AV: Yes.

KT: So, it wasn't, the full spirit of worshipping wasn't there. However, after so many, after a couple Sundays of watching a Live service, I think most families, including mine, would

just turn off the—would stop watching the Live and just have our own services for my family. We stopped watching the Live because it just didn't work for us. So, my mom, who's 78 years old, would lead our service, and the only time we would turn on the Live is when we have communion Sunday. And because we have to kind of do it, synchronizing with them with what's happening, what's going on with the live feed? Also, it's funny because, you know, with technology on this island, you know, sometimes the Live freezes.

AV: Mm-hmm, it's not as fast.

KT: It's not fast, so when it freeze and then the next time it comes on, the communion is finished, and we and we haven't even. You know, we will— so those were setbacks of, you know, worshipping online, but— Yeah, it was kind of, but, you know, there was still, there were the— What could we do? You know, no complaints, just do it and hopefully it'll get better next time, yeah?

AV: So, transportation-wise, for us Samoans, we usually use the aiga bus. Was there any social, was there any social distance on the bus?

KT: Well.

AV: Like, at first and after?

KT: Well, with me, I didn't go anywhere. I didn't go anywhere. Very little time did me and members of our family travel the road during the lockdown, only and I think mainly because we was very protective of our mother. Even, I mean, we didn't even want her to go for a ride in a car. I've heard stories that the police, the police stopped a bus, aiga bus, because they didn't, they was, it was too crowded on the bus.

AV: Yeah.

KT: They was supposed to be sitting social distancing on the bus, and, you know, it's kinda— Although we have to do social distancing on the bus, but it's kind of hard to have Samoans to social distancing on the bus. So, and to really enforce that on the people, it's almost like, it's almost like it's ridiculous. Also, who monitors social distancing on the bus? So, I've heard stories about— So, people have been complaining about social distancing on the bus. So, but, like I said, you know, some people complain about lots of things during the lockdown, but there was always that hopeful feeling that, you know, it'll get better each day as we go by, yeah.

AV: Yes. So, how are you staying connected to family, friends, work, or school? The time that there was social distancing and right now that there is no social distancing.

KT: Well, right— with my family in the mainland, in Oregon, in Texas, and Hawaii, and Alaska, I'm talking about our immediate family, my siblings. We connect through Messenger and VC, you know, through Messenger.

With my students, well, I haven't even talked about how we managed to do online, right? You know, in a way it was very kind of frustrating but also kinda hilarious and— Because, you know, we use what is called Moodle. And our school, the American Samoa Community College is not an online school. It's face-to-face, and Moodle is only used for, Moodle was, the purpose of Moodle was to cater to certain programs— It wasn't—the purpose isn't to cater for the entire school to go online. And so, all of a sudden Moodle has— all of a sudden, Moodle has everybody on it. And so, it, you know, when, the last week we had on campus, we were just told, "So, just be prepared that if you're going home, if you're gonna go home on Friday, you might not come back to campus on Monday, and that might be for several weeks." And so, we didn't, most of us instructors, didn't have any training on Moodle, so we had to find some kind of way to connect with our students virtually. So, for example, me, like myself, I used, we all had to use Moodle, but they gave us the freedom to use other means of communication with our students virtually. I also used Facebook because I find most of my students on Facebook. We used emails and we used Messenger.

We felt for the students. I felt for my students because we still had to do work and to connect with them. It was hard for them to connect with us most of the time because they didn't have Internet connection from home, right? They didn't have access to Internet. And, you know, some of them use their phone and then they had to buy data. And most of the time they don't have money for data, so they would call me and I would buy them data. Also, students, yeah. And I know I've heard stories of other faculties doing the same thing. Students, kids in my village that go to college here, there were several times at night they will come by my house and ask me if I can connect them to the Internet. So after, you know, maybe a third week of virtual schooling online, I got used to expecting kids from my village to show up at my house. So, I would just line up the tables outside of the house and connect all of them to my Wi-Fi. And what I'm saying is that we went out of our way to accommodate the students because it isn't their fault, it isn't our fault, we just had to go on a lockdown and try to continue as much as we can virtually, without any interruption of the students' need to be educated.

AV: Yes. It's wonderful. Like, also, has anything happened in the island for the past months [that] the borders were closed? What changes have you noticed most in your community and the environment? Can you talk a little bit about that?

KT: When, I think the whole spring semester, the first, I think the first five months of the year, everything was, it was, you know, like I said, it was a good family time. But, I think overall, it was a different situation, you know. Everybody felt it. In public schools, teenagers were, you know, isolated from their friends because of the lockdown. And, you know many, there has been since the beginning of the year up to now about thirteen suicide incidents among the young people. And, you know, one of the things that causes suicide is isolation.

AV: Yes.

KT: So, maybe it, you know, with the lockdown and students not getting back to their normal routine that they do at school, like, you know, with their friends. I don't know, maybe

that causes some feeling of isolation that causes these young people to take their own life. So, thirteen. That's what I, that's what I heard, about thirteen victims since the beginning of the year, up until this point.

AV: Yeah, thirteen is a big number coming from a small island of Tutuila and ever since the borders have closed, or ever since the beginning of the area has been, there have been numbers of suicides. Since I heard about it, but—

KT: Yes, but I think— But I don't want— I think, I really think that the lockdown, that is a small— I think the suicide among the young people, I think the cause of it, there are many factors of it, I think. But the lockdown, really is, has a small fraction of what it has to do with it, you know.

AV: Yeah.

KT: Because, you know, although it's locked down, but kids are not really locked now. They are with their friends. You know what I'm saying. So, it's not like, you know, lockdown on the island is not the same in America.

AV: Yes. So, we both know that our borders in American Samoa has been shut down ever since March, and there are a lot of people that are stranded, that are stranded here throughout the states that want to come home. Like, what is your opinion on that? And do you want, like, do you think, like, what is your opinion on that? Do you want the borders to open for them to come back home or not?

KT: Oh. I'm really glad that there were still closed borders. I think the governor and government officials' task force are doing the right thing to keep the borders closed because all we need is one case and, and then that's it. Because our hospital is not fully equipped to handle it, something of this magnitude. There were, you know, there were funds that we were able to receive for COVID, but those funds is not gonna turn this hospital around overnight to handle a COVID pandemic. So, I think it's the right thing to keep the stranded passengers in the mainland where there are better hospitals and better healthcare. While, at the same time, the task force is still working on a better process of when, you know, better process of when we open the border. How are we going to handle the stranded citizens when they arrive here on the island?

AV: Yes.

KT: The— What do you call that thing, the—? Those areas where we put people when they come.

AV: Oh, the quarantine areas.

KT: The quarantine sites here, I hear there's about, that we had there in the beginning, they built two quarantine sites and it only houses 50 people. Yeah, and there are more than 500 stranded citizens that wants to come home. So, I'm glad that it isn't open yet because 20, 50 people we can quarantine, and if we home-quarantine the rest, there's no sure that they really gonna stay home.

AV: Exactly.

KT: You know how Samoans are.

AV: Yeah, they're not gonna stay home.

KT: They're gonna want to go see families and give them stuff that they brought with them. They're not gonna stay home, so I'm really glad that the borders is still closed. However, I think the government should be sending some financial assistance to our citizens that are stranded off-island.

AV: Things are, I mean—

KT: You know, they should send them assistance. But as far as bringing them here, maybe not yet.

AV: Mm-hmm. So, when do you think is a good time to start opening up the borders? Or is the government ever going to be ready?

KT: Well, I think once we have a vaccine, then we'll be fine. Because, you know, going back hundred years or hundred-something years when, you know, the influenza— Only, American Samoa was one of the few places, or probably the only place in the world that was spared from the influenza pandemic, because the naval government at the time in American Samoa, they stood up and said, “No, we're not bringing anyone in.” So, you know, so that's pretty much what we're repeating, which is say, “No! Close the borders.”

AV: Exactly. What is American Samoa doing differently from Western Samoa? I know I watched the news, I read some articles that Western Samoa has opened up their borders to their people to come back home. Do you think it's gonna repeat the same process that happened in 1819 [1918 (Spanish Flu)] with them?

KT: Well, if they're doing that, I hope they have a better process of vetting, you know, people of their citizen that they brought in, because COVID, you know, it's not going to discriminate if you're—

AV: Exactly.

KT: — a citizen or not. Also, there are those with asymptomatic, you know, are asymptomatic, they can carry the virus. I hope, I really hope they have a better plan and I hope we're still gonna be closing borders between American Samoa and Samoa, because, you know what I'm saying. So, I think people are saying that the governor, you know, they're complaining about the governor not opening the borders. But you know, it's not it. I think it's the right thing. You know it's not the same because all we need is one case and once we have that one case, that is it. This is a small island compared to Upolu [Samoa].

AV: Yes. 'Kay. So, is there anything else you wanna say about the COVID-19 virus before we finish?

KT: Well, right now since we've started the fall semester, I think everything is started to opening up and it's been really good to teach face-to-face again. Although we're not 100 percent face-to-face, we're still doing some online, but we're more face-to-face now. Our church services are opening up and that's what we need. We need to go to church and pray for this, pray for the world. And we had a good White Sunday this year. It was really good. It was very short for our, church was very short, but we had White Sunday. We didn't have it virtually. We were at the church watching the kids doing their thing. You know, I think, you know, in American Samoa we're doing fine, yeah. And we're still kind of practicing social distancing, but we're not really practicing social distancing, you know. We were required to wear masks in school on campus the first couple weeks, and all of a sudden you start seeing no mask, disappear well, disappear. Yeah, seriously. I mean, even administrators, they were walking around with masks. Well, now they're like, "No mask."

AV: No masks [laughter].

KT: "Why are we wearing masks, there is no COVID?" But I think, well I hope, that our people are now educated enough of what to do when we have a case, is put on your mask, go right to social distancing right away, and wash your hands with hand sanitizer. But you know, as far as anything, we're doing fine. It's just that this suicide epidemic that now that we have, we are addressing it with counseling and prayers and those kind of thing. Yeah.

AV: Mm-hmm. It seems like ever since, like the shutdown maybe, like, a small fraction, but it seems like that with this shutdown, it made people, like American Samoa people, aware of the suicide that's been going on. But I feel like if the borders were still open and the suicides were still going on, I feel like you don't want to give that much attention to it.

KT: Yeah, exactly. So— But so far, I think it's good, it's good. You know, that's what I see. Besides the suicide epidemic on the island, you know, everything else is good. I mean, it has been really good with us, so I'm happy.

AV: Alright, thank you so much Mr. Kuki. Thank you very much.

KT: Okay, thank you.

[END OF RECORDING. END OF INTERVIEW.]