

STILL YOU

Kalani Tonga

I have a six-year old named Sofia, who, for reasons beyond my comprehension, insisted that we all call her “Cat Poop” for about six months last year. This feels relevant to the conversation at hand.

All my life, I’ve been a Mormon. The name “Mormon” was as much a part of my existence as my own name, and I wore both names with pride. I grew up outside the Jell-O Belt, so being a Mormon meant that I truly had to embrace the idea that we are a “peculiar people,” and, living in the South, I had ample opportunities to defend my “weird Mormon ways” as I spoke to Baptist and Methodist and Catholic friends. I learned the song, “I’m a Mormon” as a very young child, and I remember singing it to myself often. My family history includes polygamists and pioneers on one side, and on the other, my family attended Liahona High School and came to the United States via the Church College in Hawaii (now BYU-Hawaii). The history of Mormonism is in my blood and my bones.

More recently, my Mormonism has evolved to include being on the board of directors for a nonprofit called Feminist Mormon Housewives, whose purpose is to fund scholarships for single Mormon mothers. Many of my communities currently use the word “Mormon” as a more inclusive term for anyone whose beliefs stem from Joseph Smith’s original church, and I fully embrace the idea that there is “more than one way to Mormon.”¹

I heard the big commotion about dropping “Mormon” from the vernacular when referring to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

1. “More than one way to Mormon” is a phrase made famous by *Sunstone Magazine* when it was used as the theme for their 2018 Summer Conference.

Saints, and, admittedly, I rolled my eyes and filed it away in the Much Ado About Nothing drawer in my brain. It sat there for a while, but pretty soon I pulled it out and inspected it again, and as a *hafekasi*² Tongan woman, I have some thoughts.

Before I begin, let me state for the record that I am speaking only for myself—not for all people of color, not for all women, not for all feminists, and not even for all biracial women of Tongan and Swedish ancestry with five children who currently reside in Utah. I speak for myself alone and from my own experiences, and I do so with the hope that I am elevating the marginalized voices of other people like me, but I speak without the expectation that others will draw the same conclusions from their own experiences just because their lives happen to be similar to mine.

All that said, I believe that this insistence upon calling The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints by its full name is less about the One True Name of The Church and is much more about naming rights.

Did you know that in the Tongan culture, when a baby is born the mother of that child typically has very little say regarding the name of her own baby? Rather, it is the privilege of the child's aunties on their father's side to bestow a name upon their new niece or nephew. When a Tongan woman marries a Tongan man, she does so with the understanding that his sisters will name their future children. Naming rights belong to the paternal aunties.

If you are a *hafekasi* Tongan woman, though, you might have been raised by a non-Tongan momma who didn't necessarily follow or teach traditional Tongan culture. You might have picked out names for your imaginary future children when you were ten or eleven years old, and imagined calling said children by those names for years and years before you ever married into a very traditional Tongan family. You might have been very unpleasantly surprised to find your in-laws incredibly

2. *Hafekasi* means "half-caste" in Tongan, and denotes that I am not full Tongan. My dad is from Nakolo, Tonga, and my mom's ancestry is predominately Swedish.

displeased with your inability to just shut up and be the “right” kind of Tongan wife, and you might have spent many sleepless nights agonizing over whether naming your own children was worth the intense marital discord caused by bucking the system. As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, the “you” in this situation was me.

Ultimately, my husband and I settled on a compromise: I wanted to name my daughter after my sister (Kalea), and his family wanted us to name her after his sister (Elva), so we gave her both names and agreed to call her by her full name. Elva Kalea entered the world unaware of the turmoil we experienced as I struggled to relinquish or share the naming rights of my child. And, unsurprisingly, once she was born, family members on each side dropped the other family’s name when speaking about my daughter, with my husband’s family calling her “Elva,” and my family calling her “Kalea.” She answers to both names now, and I think that if you asked her she’d tell you that she truly has no preference for which name you call her. Both names belong to her, both names fit her, and both names are now a part of her history and identity. However, when it comes to which name is her One True Name, the traditionalists will tell you that because her aunties have naming rights, I, as her mother, am in the wrong and we should call my daughter Elva.

Nevertheless, I will use Kalea.

Kalea is her name, too.

I see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints embroiled today in a similar battle for naming rights. For years, we’ve used Mormon interchangeably to refer to the Church. We had a Church-sponsored “I’m a Mormon” campaign. There’s a delightfully campy song somewhere called the Mormon Rap. And what about the Mormon Battalion and the Mormon Trail? It seems to me that Mormon is irrevocably intertwined with Joseph Smith’s Church, regardless of whether or not current leadership particularly cares for that name.

However, this leadership group seems determined to remind us all who retains the traditional naming rights. They don’t particularly care

whether or not any other name fits. They don't care about the history or identity associated with our collective Mormon-ness. Instead, they remind us from the pulpit that they hold the power and they are the Name Keepers. They are the givers of the One True Name, and we are wrong to expect any compromise just because of silly sentiment.

As someone who has felt keenly and intimately the sting of cherishing the "wrong" name, and as one who continues to use that wrong name despite intense criticisms, I feel drawn to protect the Mormon-ness of the church. The stubborn *hafekasi* in me wants to shout that I didn't agree to this change, didn't ask for it, and don't want it. I want to rend my clothes and lament the unfairness of being expected to give up a name that means something to me just because someone else claims authoritative naming rights. Leaders tell me I am in the wrong and we should use The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Nevertheless, I will use Mormon.

I've been Mormon all my life, and that name still feels true to my identity.

Honestly, if we look at the history, these name fetishes seem to come and go, depending on the preference of those in positions of leadership. So, while part of me bristles at the thought of this leadership group randomly taking something so precious from me, I'm also a little inclined to take this whole rebranding business about as seriously as I did when my daughter Sofia adamantly insisted that we call her Cat Poop. In that moment, I thought to myself, "This, too, shall pass. And, in the meantime, I guess we can call you Cat Poop and know that you're really still Sofia Sue."

Therefore, when I hear leaders insist, "Don't call me Mormon anymore. My name is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." I hear them. But, I also think to myself, "Ok, Cat Poop, we can call you whatever you want. But, at the end of the day, I know who you really are, and you're still you."