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# Investigating the "Thief in the Night": The Reproduction and Erosion of Indigenous Forms of Social Resilience in Rural Fiji

**Lila Singh-Peterson**[1,2,3] · **Manoa Iranacolaivalu**[4]

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**Abstract**
Across the Republic of Fiji, the combination of slow onset climate change and extreme weather events continues to wreak havoc. In addition to direct damages sustained from climate impacts, the uncertainties associated with changes to natural systems in combination with depletion of natural resources and declines in biodiversity provide substantial challenges for Indigenous cultures and rural semi-subsistence livelihoods. Consequently, the concept of social resilience in terms of peoples' capacities to cope and adapt to social and ecological changes remains important. In this study, we examine local Indigenous systems of social resilience constructed in alignment with the traditional value of relationalism, and concomitant practices of *solesolevak*i (working together) and *kerekere* (requesting, gifting, sharing) to (i). understand how social resilience in this local setting is both reproduced and sustained, and (ii).to examine how moral conflicts and ambiguities arising between traditional modes of living and being, and newer, introduced ontologies attributed to late liberalism are affecting social resilience. We present an ethnographic sketch drawn from fieldwork observations and narratives undertaken in rural Fiji since 2016 and apply Robbins' (2017) theorising of culture and values to examine how people reconcile competing value systems attached to two porous social orders that structure the practices and rhythms of daily life, which Merlan (2005) refers to as the intercultural.

**Keywords** Cultural values · Social resilience · Climate change · Intercultural · Moral economy · Relationalism · Liberalism ideologies · *iTaukei* peoples · Rural development · Fiji

## Introduction

Historically, Fijian people have produced less than 0.01% of the world's annual greenhouse gas emissions (Friedlingstein et al., 2022), contributing little to the anthropogenic warming that is generating unprecedented changes in landscapes, seascapes, and icescapes across the globe. Yet, since 2000, Fiji has been affected by 29 natural disasters comprised predominantly of cyclones / major storms and floods that have led to seven Declarations for a State of Emergency in the last 22 years (University of Louvain, 2023), reflecting overwhelming impacts such as the loss of lives and destruction of major infrastructure, industries, homes and livelihoods. The quick succession of some of these extreme weather events has further eroded humans' and non-humans' capacity to recover, adapt, and prepare for future events, further exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Slow onset climate changes in terms of longer dry periods and more intense wet periods for instance, are also creating significant challenges for the relatively large semi-subsistence based rural populations (Singh-Peterson & Iranacolaivalu, 2018). At the same time, coastal erosion and freshwater inundation associated with sea level rise is a key consideration in the vulnerability assessments that have identified 830 Fijian communities at high-risk to climate change impacts (Charan et al., 2017).

In Fiji, *iTaukei* (Indigenous) people have historically responded to external threats by drawing on complex

✉ Lila Singh-Peterson
Lila.Singh-Peterson@usq.edu.au

1 School of Social Science, University of Queensland, Queensland, Australia

2 Centre for Heritage and Culture, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia

3 School of Agriculture and Environmental Science, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, QLD, Australia

4 Ministry of Agriculture, Sigatoka Research Station, Sigatoka, Fiji

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kinship-based systems rooted in sociocentrism that have provided an effective source of social protection and social resilience (Campbell, 2014) for over 3000 years of environmental, social, and political changes (Nunn et al., forthcoming). Several studies provide narratives of how rural Fijian communities have drawn from traditions of social resilience to prepare, cope with, and recover from extreme weather events (Singh-Peterson & Iranacolaivalu, 2018; Korovulavula et al., 2020). But, like other non-capitalist traditional societies engaging in capitalist markets and liberalist ideologies, some Fijian people have raised concerns about the erosion of traditional social systems (Slatter, 2006; Meo-Sewabu, 2016; Becker, 2017). Of great concern, within the context of climate change are reports of the erosion of critically important traditions of social resilience structured around relational values that underscore Fijian traditions and sociocentric practices (Meo-Sewabu, 2016; Movono & Becken, 2018).

It is within this local context that we seek to understand the contemporary processes by which traditional forms of social resilience are both reproduced and eroded. Despite much interdisciplinary focus on the concept of social resilience, there are still relatively few studies that bridge the conceptual understanding of resilience to the empirical or practice domain by presenting the local socio-cultural dynamics by which systems of social resilience are reproduced (Tanner et al., 2015; Crate, 2016) particularly within the context of semi-subsistence rural based Indigenous communities. Scant attention has also been applied to identifying place-based, or conflicting social processes that directly or indirectly erode a community's social resilience. Yet given Fiji's risk profile associated with future climate change, and its long history of cyclones and flooding recorded since 1871 (see Campbell, 1984), understanding processes that actively erode systems of social resilience is an important, albeit neglected, area of study.

This article has two primary objectives. Firstly, we draw upon the multidisciplinary concept of social resilience to present the ways by which social resilience is sustained and reproduced through the rural traditions of an Indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei) c*ommunity by highlighting the integral role of the traditional value system of relationalism that underscores rural traditional sociocentric practices of *solesolevaki* (working together) and *kerekere* (requesting, gifting, sharing*).* These traditional practices, facilitated by the *iTaukei vakavanua* (custom), provide a foundation for the moral economy and local systems of social resilience. We present narratives gathered through ethnographic fieldwork since 2016 that comprise accounts of how the traditional values that underscore systems of social resilience remain paramount for the *iTaukei* community in this study. This is turn, enables a view of how these sociocentric practices are locally constructed and reproduced.

Our second aim is to situate this study of social resilience within Merlan's (2005) concept of the intercultural as it acknowledges that people engage with different social orders or understandings of place-world concurrently. Our objective is to understand how social and economic forms of globalisation that actively promote liberalism ideologies have affected sociocentric traditions of social resilience as reported by ethnographers in Fiji. We argue that an analysis of how social resilience is locally reproduced and sustained in rural Fiji must account for interactions between dominant social orders—in this case between the traditional *iTaukei* social order, and the westernised liberalist-centred social order. Both have distinct social forms, yet are contingent and interconnected, or as Gershon (2019) described, are porous social orders[1]. We apply Robbins' (2017) theorising of culture and values to examine the moral conflicts or ambiguities that arise as people reconcile these two cultural logics within the intercultural domain. Specifically, we are interested in whether liberalism aligned practices are eroding the reproduction of sociocentric traditions such as *kerekere* and *solesolevaki* that form the foundations of social resilience in rural Fiji.

By applying these concepts and theories to fieldwork observations and discussions, this article engages in a dialectical discussion between theory and empiricism as we present an ethnographic sketch of the way in which people reconcile these two conflicting cultural logics. We make the case that the moral ambiguities and conflicts presented in this study can create the conditions for the detraditionalization of sociocentric rural traditions, as other ethnographers have reported. However, somewhat paradoxically, we also present the ways in which liberalism, as enacted through engagement in capitalist economies, has also assisted community members to sustain and reproduce these same sociocentric traditions.

The ethnographic data presented here were compiled through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and group discussion forums with *iTaukei* peoples located near Savusavu on Vanua Levu Island, Fiji. In accordance with human research ethics agreements and the principles of talanoa that require respectful, truthful, and voluntary participation (see Wheeler et al., 2018), data presented in this article were compiled during three field trips, over a period of three years (2016–2018) and during a more recent trip in 2023, although both authors have engaged with the village participants in other research-for-development projects since 2014. Prior to presenting these data, we describe the

[1] Porous boundaries, Gershon (2019: 2) explains, allow "people, ideas, objects and forms [to] circulate between social orders in ways that often keep distinctions between social orders durable."

rural traditions of social resilience that situate and contextualise our research data, analysis, and findings.

## Background

### Traditions of Social Resilience

Of necessity, many communities vulnerable to climate change or other external stressors have over time cultivated high levels of social resilience to deal with precarious social and environmental threats (Laska & Peterson, 2013; Oliver-Smith, 2016). Extreme weather events and variabilities in climate are however, providing unprecedented changes that some traditional methods historically used to read and predict natural ecological systems, such as seasonal calendars, are now ineffective against (Crate, 2011; Crate & Nuttall, 2016). As the climate system continues to shift into more uncertain domains, in combination with pandemics and global market fluctuations; effective socio-cultural traditions of social resilience remains important, particularly for rural communities in Fiji (Korolavula et al., 2019).

By definition, social resilience occurs when a community retains the capacity to absorb disturbances, such as climate change impacts or other environmental or social crises, while retaining the same basic structures, identification, and ways of functioning (Walker et al., 2004). Social resilience is "culturally constructed, and socially enacted" (Oliver-Smith, 2016: 293) and enabled or obstructed through political, institutional, and economic forces.

As elsewhere in the Pacific Islands, customary systems of social resilience in Fiji are embedded in social relations through which reciprocity and redistribution are made possible (Schuermann & Lauer, 2016). Sharing protocols are traditionally complex and rules-based, which includes obligations and practices among relations defined by kinship, rank, authority, and gender, which can produce both positive and negative outcomes for individuals. The moral economy in this context is defined, and sustained through these relationships, which sets it apart from the neoclassical economy (Carrier, 2018), that we refer to here as the cash or capitalist economy. For *iTaukei* Fijians, exchange, gifting, and sharing can be negotiated between individuals and between agnatic kinship groupings referred to as *vuvale* (nuclear families), *tokatoka* (several *vuvale*), *mataqali* (several *tokatoka* / tribe) or at the *yavusa* level (several *mataqali* /clan level) (Ravuvu, 1983). All of these kinship groupings aggregate to form the human component of the *vanua*, which can incorporate several clans (*yavusa).*

Central to a study of social resilience in rural Fiji is the *iTaukei* moral economy of solidarity and social resilience, expressed in part through the traditions of *solesolevaki* (working together) and *kerekere*[2] (requesting, gifting, and sharing). *Solesolevaki* represents the relationships between the physical, social, and spiritual elements of the *vanua* (Raisele, 2021), which is often interpreted as the social capital of the *vanua* community (Movono & Becken, 2018). The moral action of "doing" *solesolevaki* strengthens these internal bonds 'through continual social interactions,' perpetuating and enhancing the capacity for *solesolevaki* (Movono & Becken (2018: 151).

Similarly, the reified custom of *kerekere* in combination with *solesolevaki* forms the basis for the moral economy that enables "goods, resources, services, or use rights in goods or resources" to be requested, gifted, or shared via one or many *iTaukei* sharing protocols (Sahlins, 1962:203, 1965, 1993). Endogenous in origin, *kerekere* was the prevailing method of exchange amongst kinspeople that early ethnographers referred to simplistically as the begging system (Sahlins, 1962). In general, customary systems organised around the moral economy ensure that critical or additional resources and care are provided for a substantial number of Fijian peoples and households (Jimenez & Brown, 2013). Accordingly, these *iTaukei* traditions have been connected to social capital and social resilience concepts in previous studies in Fiji (Ratuva, 2014; Movono & Becken, 2018; Nakamura & Kanemasu, 2020; Steven & Vunibola, 2021; Singh-Peterson, 2023).

## Methodology

### Robbins' theorising of culture and values and ethnographic fieldwork

Robbins', like Dumont (2013) conceptualises culture in part as expressions of values. Values are internalised and central to how traditions, rituals, beliefs and other forms of cultural expression take shape because they "are the things that people are actively trying to realise or produce as they go about their lives" (Robbins, 2017: 38). This provides a useful way to examine the value pluralism confronting many contemporary societies as they navigate local traditions orientated around a paramount cultural value, and newer, introduced values and ontologies present in the intercultural domain.

Drawing from Robbins' (2017) approach enables an analysis of how the liberalist values embedded in classic economic ideologies and expressions of self-reliance and individualism interact with the *iTaukei* value of relationalism which finds expression through varied social practices and norms including sociocentric traditions of redistribution

[2] The chiefly version of *kerekere* is called *lálá*, which is proportionally larger than *kerekere* as the *kerekere* grows in proportion to hereditary status (Thomas, 1992).

and communal effort. These intersections, or value conflicts create moral ambiguities as people reconcile these two prevailing cultural logics. We seek to understand what repercussions these moral conflicts might have for systems of social resilience that are essential in preparing and responding to climate-induced damages and losses, and slow onset climate change.

The *iTaukei vanua* community who have informed this study reside in, or near three *koro* (villages). Our research is undertaken with people from the main chiefly village of the *vanua* where the paramount chief, the *turaga ni vanua* resides. The village is located on the south-eastern coast of Vanua Levu Island, about one hour (via town bus) from the main tourist town of Savusavu. The village is bounded to the north-west by a river system that runs from the mountains in the west to the coast about 20 km away. At the base of the mountains, the Hibiscus Highway links the villages along the eastern peninsula of the island to the markets and services located in Savusavu (Fig. 1).

The *vanua* community comprises seven *mataqali* (tribes) that were historically each allocated a role still adhered to today, including the leadership responsibilities of the Chiefly *mataqali*, and the advisory role of another *mataqali* within the same *yavusa* (clan). Other *mataqali* are historically responsible for catching fish and seafood, and for providing firewood. Several of the *mataqali* are warrior tribes.

We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with community members, participant observations, and 12 group discussion forums (*talanoa*). Where an interviewee held a position or title, or performed a role that related to their comments, this additional information has been provided. Participants advised the authors of their titles, and reference to *iTaukei* words and language has been drawn from their use of these terms[3]. Interviews were recorded with permission, transcribed and then analysed using standard thematic analysis methods. Nvivo software was employed to assist with organising and coding data.

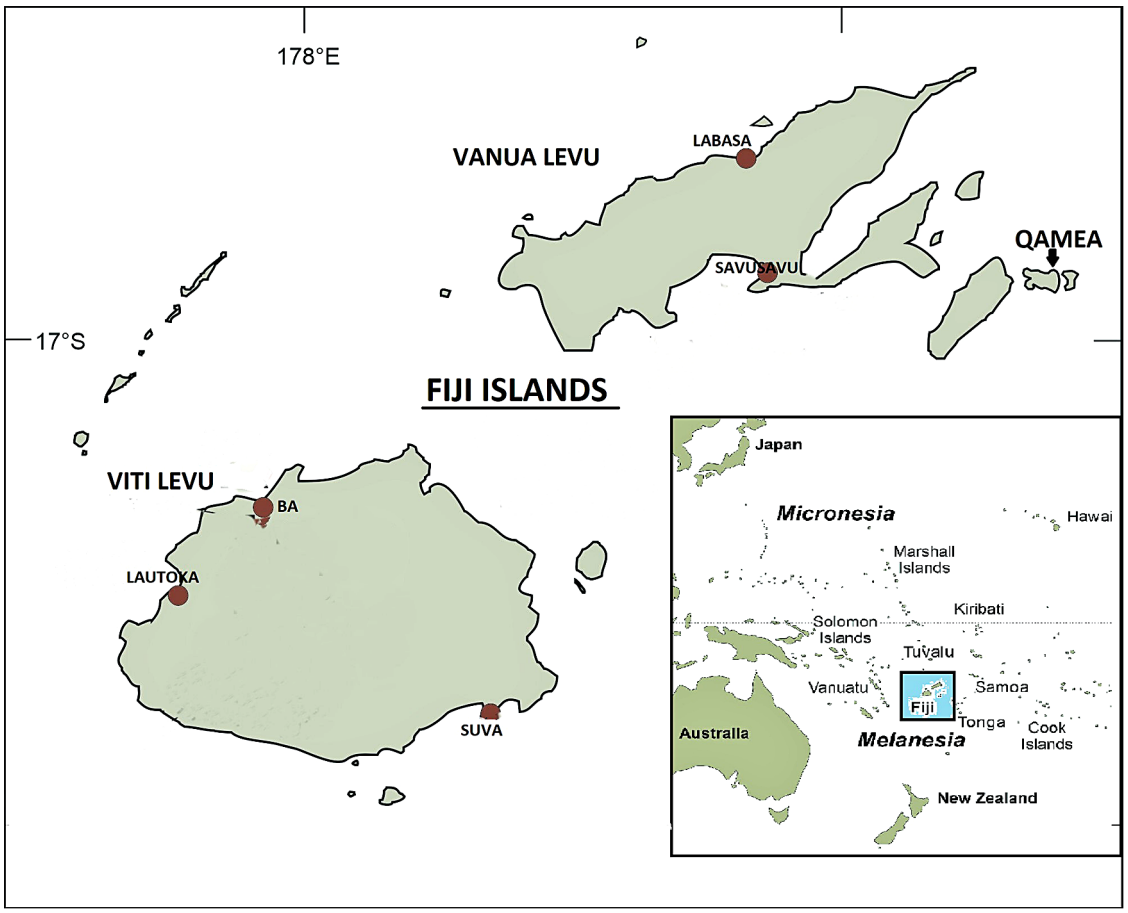


**Fig. 1** Vanua Levu Island and other Fijian Islands located in the South Pacific Ocean (insert)

[3] Many of the Fijian terms are from the Bauan dialect.

## Results

### Cultural Values that Underscore Traditions of Social Resilience

Similar to Robbins (2017), we argue that relationalism is a paramount value for many *iTaukei* communities located on Vanua Levu Island, Fiji. The value of relationalism is embedded in *iTaukei* custom (Hulkenberg, 2015), referred to as the *vakavanua*, which translates as "the way of the *vanua"* or the "way of the land." Both phrases are widely considered to be analogous with *vakaviti*, which refers to the "Fijian manner" (Sahlins, 1993: 853), or the "Fijian way" (Jolly, 1992). A central concept of the *vakavanua* is the *vanua* philosophy, which Nabobo-Baba (2006: 155) describes as "a people, their chief, their defined territory, their waterways, their fishing grounds, their environment, their spirituality, their history, their epistemology, and culture."

Relational ontologies reflected in the *vanua* philosophy describe an understanding of the nature of reality defined in terms of the relationships between entities, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things beyond kinship relationships. For many, the *iTaukei* worldview that encompasses *iTaukei* epistemology comprises dimensions of interactions among humans, animals, plants, and the spiritual world[4] (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Raisele, 2021). Relationalism reflects these various types of relationality, including Descola's (2013) naturalism ontology of relatedness.

Within the human realm, there are diverse understandings of what characterises kinship, and how relatedness between kin is locally constituted. Kinship for many *iTaukei* Fijian people is primarily constituted via procreation with agnate patrilineage patterns structuring forms of authority, status, and responsibilities within the *vanua* community. Sahlins (2011a) describes kinship of this type as a mutuality of being in that kin participate "intrinsically in each other's existence" with kinship bonds strengthened through concepts of shared ancestors, customary land, and traditions of reciprocity and exchange. Sahlins (2011a, p. 2) explains mutuality of being as referring to transpersonal relations of being that explain how some "relatives live each other's lives and die each other's deaths." Others have referred to this form of personhood as comprising both dividual and individual characteristics (Strathern, 2018).

During periods of field work in Vanua Levu, we have often observed the ways in which the responsibility of looking after the needs of all people within the *vanua* community is keenly felt by the leaders of the *vanua*. The *turaga ni koro* (headman of the village) explained this during a semi-structured interview in 2017 when we asked him to explain his role:

> …my most important role is to see to the needs of every individual within the village, from every single individual to their families, to their tokatoka and right up to the *vanua* as a whole. … my major interest is to raise the standard of living of every family, from the very young to the widow, to the widowers, people with disabilities, everyone, everyone's voice must be heard. I must ensure that every individual in the village, their voice must be heard, and their needs addressed.

When asked how he manages this responsibility, the *turaga ni koro* described his process. After determining what the individual or family needs are, he then "takes these needs to the respective agencies, whether it be children's needs or social welfare, the intervention of the vanua, or the intervention of the church." He explained that he tries to the best of his ability to ensure that the needs are met, and that the process by which the needs can be met are acceptable to the individual or family. The *turaga ni koro* explained that there were several individuals and families who needed more of his assistance than others:

> "…there are a few cases in the villages, with disabilities, or widows, some with children who require assistance. The major need is for food and improving their houses because no one is beside them. Some of them don't have relatives to look after them, so I've been addressing this in my four years … but sometimes it is disappointing because it takes time for the assistance to come. ".

When asked whether the assistance does arrive, he added:

> … normally it does come. It takes time, sometimes a few months, or a few years but I'm glad to see in my term that support is coming in to the most in need of assistance from the [government] agencies.

For rural *iTaukei* communities, the Provincial Office and the Provincial Councils provide an important facilitation point where the *turaga ni koro* can be directed to the relevant government agencies or supported to access needed services and resources. As an elected role over a four-year term, the governmental role of the *turaga ni koro* is about being the "bridge" between the *vanua*, and the *matanitu* (government), ideally to ensure that *vanua* members are provided with the external resources and services that they need.

[4] The *iTaukei* world view comprises three interconnected dimensions, *lagi* (heavens), *vuravura* (earth,) and *bulu* (underworld). All three dimensions and everything in them form the *vanua (*Nabobo-Baba, 2006).

In another example, a representative of the village's Women's Group also described that part of her role required her to "look for the whole—to help each other." The focus upon the wellbeing of the whole *vanua* community was emphasised in both leaders' general descriptions of their roles.

Others in the *vanua* expressed similar views. For instance, in an interview in 2018 a *turaga ni mataqali* (a chief of one of the *mataqali*) was pointing out the houses of his children when asked about potential land boundary issues. He recounted an event in which he had planted some bananas near his boundary, explaining that he plants a lot of food as he has nine children to feed, and from time to time, he likes to sell the bananas in the market. He later discovered that the bananas were being harvested by his neighbours. When asked how he responded, he carefully explained that he was not upset because the people who had taken the bananas were kinspeople, and he assumed that they were hungry. He did however ask them to also plant bananas along the boundary so that there was enough for everyone. Through these simple, everyday examples it is apparent that relationalism as a fundamental value encompasses the practices, views, and sentiments of these village leaders. These examples also indicate that the moral economy is still relevant and central to many forms of exchange within the village.

## Contemporary Forms of Social Resilience

During periods of fieldwork, members of the community have often raised concerns about coastal erosion and flooding following king tides and cyclone events since our first discussions in 2014. Due to its proximity to the coast and river system, parts of the village are frequently flooded during wet seasons, and more frequently by storm surges. Cyclones have also greatly affected the village; many houses lost roofs during Cyclone Winston in 2015, which also destroyed the villagers' subsistence gardens and stripped wild fruits from the forest trees. Our visit to the village in 2023 revealed the extent of the impact of climate change in eroding the village's coastline, which has resulted in inundation, salination of freshwater resources and in combination with cyclones and storm surges, has destroyed local habitats displacing fish and crustacean ecosystems.

The loss of fish has obvious economic impacts for the women of the women's development committee who had frequently organized the sale of cooked fish and taro in the local markets. During a focus group discussion in 2018, the women explained how the money raised through their market activities was used to pay for church events or fees, or for other *vanua* affairs. However, as these economic activities were no longer possible, the reduction in the amount of time taken to catch fish, prepare and sell in the marketplace, has led to greater participation in *solesolevaki* activities, such as weaving. The women also reported that financial hardships have required the community to become more attuned to each other's needs, and an increase in sharing and gifting has resulted. In these ways, climate change impacts have led to a reduction in some women's engagement in the cash economy and reduced their capacity to fund the material components of the moral economy, but at the same time, has enabled women to spend more time together on shared projects vis-a-vis *solesolevaki*. The time together, during and after the COVID pandemic lockdown, they say, has "brought us closer together" and reinvigorated traditional forms of exchange within the moral economy. Part of the reason for this is because women who regularly sell produce in the marketplace or worked in tourism enterprises were no longer engaging in these economic activities and had time to participate in these traditions.

Following the COVID pandemic, many *vanua* members residing in cities returned to the village and turned their attention to farming. For some this decision was likely a result of losing their jobs and becoming unable to meet financial demands for rent and food in the cities (see Dean, 2020). In early 2023, the *turaga ni koro* explained that there was still available *mataqali* land to accommodate boys and men returning to the village who wished to engage in farming. Several houses were erected in the village and extensions and repairs to older houses were visible in 2023. The *turaga ni koro* explained that the houses had been erected via *solesolevaki* as the population in the village had expanded which had revitalized these traditions. The *turaga ni koro* also described the intensive agricultural activities that were also undertaken on farmlands and in household gardens to ensure that together, the village could produce enough food to feed everyone during the pandemic.

The safety net provided by the *vanua* community, and the villagers' experiences of reconnecting to *solesolevaki* practices during the COVID pandemic was not isolated. A return to rural villages and to subsistence agriculture and traditional relational values was observed in many places across Fiji (Randin, 2020). Although the villagers spoke about an increase in *solesolevaki* activities during the pandemic, engagement in the cash economy once lockdown had been lifted followed traditional gender roles. Boys and men had access to farmland and the opportunity to sell kava and root crops, while during the pandemic women returned to family homes and amongst other activities, participated in group weaving activities that on occasion sold mats in the marketplace.

Although there is great diversity between *vanua* communities, historically, almost all the activities and occasions accomplished by the *iTaukei vanua* community were undertaken via *solesolevaki* (Raisele, 2021). These included

occasions like *vatunudra* (feast for new mothers), *matai ni cabuka / matai ni qoli* (first firewood and fishing trip with an aunt or uncle), and the many other rites of passage celebrated throughout one's life and into the afterlife (Raisele, 2021). In addition to these activities, in the village s*olesolevaki* is also practised to achieve tasks for the village or for members of the *vanua*, such as for *cakacaka vakoro* (monthly clean-up of the village) and for *tare bure* (construction of houses). Many of the women's previous activities in the village such as weaving mats, collecting food and fishing, preparing food, and caring for others were historically often coordinated as a community via *solesolevaki*. Several studies in Fiji have emphasised the "double burden" that women are exposed to when balancing customary sharing and caring obligations with a need to earn cash in the marketplace (Varani-Norton, 2005; Yabaki, 2006; Vilisoni et al., 2019).

## An erosion of Sociocentric Practices?

Undeniably, the influence of the cash economy has had an enormous effect on the rural Fijian society. Engagement in the cash economy via local fresh food markets demands more of people's time and energy, and for some has resulted in changing gender roles and increased workloads (Ward, 1995, p. 16; Varani-Norton, 2005; Yabaki, 2006; Vilisoni et al., 2019). Varani-Norton (2005: 226) found many *iTaukei* peoples are drawn to the prospects of an easier lifestyle and economic security but were concerned about the possible erosion of cultural traditions as they attempted to meet customary obligations whilst also holding onto "unrealistic hopes created by the promises of development." This concern or fear of erosion of important social traditions like *solesolevaki* due to the modern emphasis placed on liberalism has been likened to a '*thief in the night'* robbing people of time and opportunities to come together as a community (Meo-Sewabu & Walsh-Tapiata, 2012).

To contextualise this further, historically money and culture have often been positioned in opposition to one another, which may account for some of the participants' concerns about succumbing to the "path of the money" and disengaging from traditional obligations and roles. Part of the origin of this tension may be associated with the position of colonial administrators in Fiji. Kaplan (1989) draws attention to the way in which the colonial government ascribed roles for *iTaukei* peoples as communalist, traditionalist landowners in contrast to the Indian labourers who were characterised as individualist and capitalist. The colonial administration's management of the two populations was entirely different (Kaplan, 1989). The administrative relationships with *iTaukei* peoples were enacted at the community level and mediated through the chiefs. In contrast, administrative procedures focussed on the individual Indo-Fijian person, with individual placements and contracts that categorically linked the Indo-Fijians with the pursuit of money and freedom through individualism and capitalism (Jolly, 1992). The emic opposition between custom and 'the path of money' embedded in the colonial administrative practices was reflected in this quote from the 1980s "we Fijians know our duties. Europeans have money; Fijians have custom" (Rutz, 1987). In contemporary Fiji, engagement in capitalist markets by Fijian people takes many forms that reflect a range of values and preferred practices (Singh-Peterson, 2023).

In contrast to the narratives that described renewed participation in *solesolevaki* activities during the pandemic; themes relating to the erosion of sociocentric traditions were certainly evident in the informal conversations, *talanoa* sessions, and recorded interviews undertaken with members of the *vanua* community prior to and following the pandemic. On one such occasion, we were sitting with the *turaga ni vanua* (chief of the *vanua*) on a veranda prior to the Covid pandemic as he surveyed the village in front of us. He commented that …

> "The vanua had built about 20 houses, which are still standing now, in the village. So they produced food together, as a vanua, in order to help with the building of the houses, to do them together in one village. [He then pointed to a partly constructed house, and softly added] … now at this point in time, even the youths cannot work together to build one house. Most of the work that is undertaken now is individual – that's what has changed. ".

Prior to this comment, the *mata ni vanua* (chiefly spokesperson) explained how, in his view, financial pursuits had gained importance, which he considered had partially eroded important social traditions and customs within the *vanua*. He explained that:

> One of the changes we now experience in the village is the incorporation of [cash] money into our village system. So before, most of the solesolevaki that we do in the village is done communally, cooperative system, where families, tokatoka work together. When money comes there is a lot of individualism that brings with it. People are working individually, doing their own, so it brings some gaps within families, and those who are not strong enough financially, seem to be neglected.

A similar comment was raised by a *turaga ni mataqali* who also expressed his concern about the perceived erosion of the practice of *kerekere.* Reflecting on recent past events,

he recalled a time when you could ask your neighbours for something you need, and they would share or give it to you. He contrasted this experience with contemporary times, attributing the rising cost of living as the main reason why people in his village were no longer practicing this form of *kerekere*. These views were also expressed by the *turaga ni vanua*, who explained:

> The biggest change, I experienced from my childhood days … I was brought up in the colonial days. The leadership at that time was important … money was not important. Monetary assets[5] were not there. So, the life in the vanua was very much intact and our relationship between the tokatoka, mataqali, between brothers and sisters and cousins is still intact. But now money comes in because the cost of living is high. Everything is where money is involved, education, church, everyday living, this brings relationship gaps in the vanua.

The comments by the leaders of the *vanua* speak to the moral ambiguity that some villagers experience when trying to reconcile the intercultural logics of relationalism and liberalism. According to other people in the village, this has been the site of moral ambiguity for many people within the village. Specifically, the expectations were that *vanua* members continue to practice *solesolevaki* and *kerekere* to raise funds to be shared / gifted with those in need, in alignment with the traditional value of relationalism. In contrast, several *vanua* members have consciously chosen to not participate in *solesolevaki* activities and to prioritise engaging in the cash economy aligned with the value of liberalism.

Over the last 35 years, ethnographers in Fiji have reported the various ways that the rapid globalisation of values of liberalism that encourage individual economic interests, individual autonomy, and social equality of opportunity have conflicted with rural sociocentric traditions that underpin systems of social resilience (Ravuvu, 1983; Brison, 2001; Meo-Sewabu, 2016; Presterudstuen, 2016; Becker, 2017). Liberalism is one of the dominant value systems of many of Fiji's neighbouring countries and trading partners, particularly Australia and New Zealand, which is reflected in Fiji's national development policies, international trade agreements, and the socio-economic activities of many urban Fijians and migrant communities. Liberalism as a dominant, western value is associated with notions of individualism, self-interest, and personal liberty that, in many parts of the world, have resulted in pervasive market competition, the promotion of consumerism, economic efficiencies, and the concomitant withdrawal of the welfare State (Fedirko et al., 2021).

## Concepts of Moral Actions that Sustain or Diminish Traditions

We emphasise that the interviewees are not saying that the traditions of *solesolevaki* or *kerekere* are no longer important, or that the values underpinning the moral economy are no longer relevant or instrumental in social life. However, they are saying that people are increasingly preoccupied with earning money due to the rising cost of living. In these instances, the re-prioritisation of liberalism as a higher value than relationalism in Dumont's value hierarchy seems to have been the outcome of individual moral reasoning stemming from an actual or perceived need to acquire cash as a primary objective instead of contributing to and relying on *solesolevaki* and *kerekere* traditions.

To put this into context, some of the women in the village who have in the past sold their baked fish and taro in the marketplace have reiterated over several years that the expectations of customary obligations, in addition to those of the church, continue to increase. They explained that those who worked or had generous family members overseas bore the brunt of supporting the church and *vanua* community's commitments. As a result, some of the women had at times reduced their circle of reciprocity to those within their *mataqali*, or their household, and no longer participated in all of the activities organised for the *vanua* community. Notably, they still aimed to support the sociocentric traditions of their *mataqali* but, reluctantly, financial matters occupied more and more of their thinking and planning, which required them to engage more in the cash economy. Obligations associated with *kerekere* also placed additional pressure on economic activities and small businesses, which Farrelly and Vudiniabola (2013) and Singh-Peterson (2023) observed as a blurring between the moral and capitalist cash economies.

This reduced the time available to participate further in *vanua* affairs. Focussing on the values that have motivated people to prioritise engaging in cash markets over participating in *solesolevak*i traditions highlights that in many cases it is actually because of the burden of social obligations that people are turning towards liberalism aligned practices. The obligations of the *vanua*, and church have required greater engagement in cash economies, which has effectively restricted people's engagement in the community's sociocentric traditions. So, in this instance, the "thief in the night" may in fact be the overburden of customary and church obligations.

[5] "Monetary assets" was a term used by the *turaga ni vanua*. Later when discussing the use of this term, the translator explained that the Chief was referring to material possessions and the consumption of tangible things. Other interviewees quoted spoke initially in English.

Financial obligations that people spoke about included *soli ni yasana* (provincial levy), and *tavi ni mataqali* (*mataqali* contribution) to *yavusa* and the *vanua*, as well as church fees. Villagers were expected to contribute towards the provision and cost of food and ceremonial objects at funerals, weddings, and the many other events facilitated by their community. The expectations of food and ceremonial gifts presented to and by guests, the women explained, continued to increase in cost and quantities to maintain status and traditional customary hierarchies among *vanua* communities. These aspirations continue to place additional strain on contributors. Additionally, school uniforms and school fundraising activities also require households to have available cash.

By way of an example of financial and time obligations, the *turalevu* (the church steward) in charge of collecting the church membership fees[6] explained that in 2018, each member of the Methodist Church who resided within the village paid $F80 per person and a further $F15 per person for the annual collection for the Church headquarters. To put this into context, the most recent 2019 Household Income and Expenditure Survey conducted by the Fijian Government's Bureau of Statistics (2019) estimated that about 34% of the households in the Savusavu region of Vanua Levu had total household incomes of less than $F42 per week, accordingly, $F100 per person for a household of four or five people is a substantial sum of money. To meet this obligation, many people planned to sell additional produce in the market to slowly raise the money needed for these fees. The church depends upon the *vanua* members for its economic capital as well as requiring the *vanua* community to provide the church minister with a house, land, and a church building. In exchange, the church social network provides a measure of social protection, and spiritual guidance for many people within the village.

Together, these obligations create a significant financial burden, in addition to the not insignificant amount of time required for *solesolevaki* in the form of village clean-up and fundraising. Participation in these activities, in addition to new *vanua* projects such as conservation or aid projects, further restricts people's time and energy. Other customary obligations in the form of the fulfilment of customary roles and responsibilities such as caring duties for family members require individuals to prioritise the needs of the *vanua* community over their own aspirations, which similarly creates moral conflicts and ambiguity for *vanua* members.

For some *vanua* members, complying with traditional values and practices over undertaking practices aligned with earning money may not be conflicted or ambiguous. These may include *vanua* members who have retired from wage employment and others who receive financial support from other sources, mostly via remittances. These circumstances enable them to contribute to and draw from the moral economy. We are also reminded that for the leaders of the *vanua* community, relationalism as a core value is very evident in their narratives about service to their *vanua* community and their promotion and facilitation of the traditional practices of *kerekere* and *solesolevaki.*

Several of the village women who chose to reduce their circle of reciprocity to focus only on their *mataqali* obligations explained that collectively they were saving for a wedding in the village, and others were planning a feast for a new mother. Restricting their contribution to their own *mataqali* through necessity limited the reach and expansion of the moral economy and consequently eroded aspects of the community's level of social resilience.

Initially, it would appear that a moral conflict had emerged, whereby the value of liberalism manifested as individual autonomy and greater individual pursuit of capitalism had become more important to the women and had effectively displaced the traditional value of relationalism, and its associated practices. However, we argue that in fact the decisions made by the women indicate that relationalism is still regarded as the paramount *long-term* societal value, primarily because the women's need for cash revolved around the desire to fulfil the customary obligations of the moral economy. In this way, engagement in capitalist markets has enabled the women to sustain their traditional obligations to the moral economy. We argue that in this example of value pluralism, relationalism remains the primary value for the women who had needed to resist the increasing expectations of their many benefactors. These extensive customary obligations were in effect pushing people towards liberal markets and ideologies and creating the need for people to reduce their circle of *kerekere* and *solesolevaki* activities. Consequently, the sociocentric traditions that facilitate social resilience are reduced to the scale of the *mataqali* as opposed to the village or *vanua* level. In this instance, social resilience processes would most effectively operate at the scale of the *mataqali.*

We are also reminded of the return to sociocentric traditions during the pandemic, and the communal drive to increase food production for all the villagers. Undeniably, these are effective communal activities that enhance levels of social resilience aided by the establishment and social organisation of the *vanua* structure as well as established traditions, practices, and norms associated with relationalism as a central value. It is notable, however, that due to hardships experienced in the village, the scale of sociocentric practices has been reduced as the expectations of customary or church obligations have increased.

[6] We suspect that the fees are tithes, but it was explained to us in English as a `membership fee'.

Remittances provide another example of the prioritising of relationalism over liberalism by *iTaukei* Fijians residing abroad. As Fiji's economy has transitioned to one increasingly dependent on tourism (World Bank, 2023), many Fijian households are reliant on financial support from relatives overseas. International remittances sent by family members from the United States, New Zealand, and Australia have grown from about $US286.5 million in 2019 to $US450 million in 2022 during the pandemic. Currently, international remittances make up over 9% of Fiji's GDP (World Bank, 2023), which can be viewed as a response to increasing economic hardship being experienced in Fiji as well as a result of the ever-expanding global economy. The sheer volume of remittances further demonstrates the importance of relationalism as a paramount value, which has led to a contemporary expansion of the moral economy. We also note that remittances are enabled through international connections facilitated through activities like paid employment or capitalist exchange in marketplaces. In this way, traditional modes of exchange via the moral economy have been enabled by, and integrated with, the cash economy, which paradoxically has partially contributed to its erosion. So, much like the village women in the earlier example, from the perspective of Fijians living abroad, obligations to contribute financially to relatives' requests back home in Fiji in an ever-widening monetary economy can place new migrants under enormous pressure (Hulkenberg, 2015).

In considering this Fijian setting, we argue that the moral conflicts between relationalism and liberalism aligned practices and traditions are likely to be relatively common across the South Pacific. In Papua New Guinea for instance, Robbins (2013, 2017) found that the Urapmin peoples made "significant efforts to install Christian individualism as their dominant value" but were unable to displace the cultural value of relationalism, which continued to organize the main productive and reproductive contexts of sociality, reflecting some of our findings in this study.

## Dynamic Values, Climate, and Cultural Change

Reflective of the dynamism of cultural life, the unevenness of change, and inconsistencies of cultural traditions (Sahlins, 1993), we found that applying Robbins' (2017) work with values and culture to an *iTaukei* Fijian context enabled a deeper examination of the moral ambiguity consistent with value pluralism and intercultural social life. The value of relationalism, and the associated practices of *solesolevaki* and *kerekere* are key components of local systems of social resilience. Displacement or erosion of relationalism as a primary value by the *iTaukei vanua* community would have indicated that local social resilience systems were likely in decline, and that villagers were no longer bound to a sense of moral obligation to reproduce traditions like *kerekere* and *solesolevaki*. This was not our finding.

We further note that capitalism, and social and economic forms of globalisation, have undeniably intruded into the social life of the *vanua* community for decades and has accordingly been culturally mediated and adapted during this period. Paradoxically, we have found that it is precisely because of the demands and obligations associated with the moral economy that some people have needed to engage in markets underscored by liberalism values. Overall, we found that a goal for many of the peoples who have informed this study was primarily to contribute to their communities' moral economy and by association, local systems of social resilience.

We acknowledge that other members of the *vanua* have left the village to pursue education, to engage in capitalism and build individual careers and livelihoods, and so they may have prioritised liberalism over relationalism at this time. Due to their absence in the village, these views are not represented in our study. We also note that people moving away from the villages and kinfolk who engage more in liberalism in larger economies overseas or in Fiji's cities provided remittances that many within the villages are reliant upon. In these ways, engagement in cash economies and liberalism ideologies have become an important source of the material aspects of the moral economy that support important social resilience and adaptation activities within the village.

Finally, we propose that by linking moral actions and reasoning between core societal values through application of the Robbins' (2017) theory, an analysis of community members' moral negotiations and cultural logics that relate to the production and sustenance of the community's social resilience can be observed. Robbin's theory as applied here has also provided important insights about the interactions within the intercultural domain that have identified the value mediated processes that indirectly act to erode or strengthen resilience.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** Project Number 2021/HE002323 Fluid ideologies of the vanua in a rapidly changing world. University of Queensland's HASS LNR confirms that this project meets the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. Two human research ethics approvals were granted to conduct the research presented in this thesis: (1) Examining perceptions of a good life and identifying strategic needs in rural villages of Fiji, Samoa and Tonga (A/16/808). Approval provided by the University of the Sunshine Coast for research conducted from 23 May 2016 to 23 November 2018. (2) Fluid ideologies of the *vanua* in a rapidly changing world (2021/HE002323). Approval provided by the University of Queensland for research conducted from 17th January 2022 to 31st July 2023.

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