

THE ORGANIC ISLAND

An ethnographic study of subsistence economics and creative
resilience in the Lau Islands of Fiji



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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the multifaceted dimensions of sociality found in subsistence economic activities in the Lau Islands of Fiji. Primarily based on fieldwork conducted on the island of Cicia, I examine how land and sea resources are socially manifested in the everyday lives of coastal indigenous iTaukei Fijians. With just a weekly flight and monthly ferry delivering supplies to Cicia from the main island of Viti Levu, subsistence resources are the most critical components to the day-to-day dietary of village communities on the island. Yet, subsistence resources are not just of nutritional value to villagers. The ecological foundation of subsistence economics also underpins extensive sets of knowledge practices, social relationships, and the human-environmental encompassment of the archipelago of Lau. By accounting for social values of sea and land, the thesis shows how ecology is a material foundation to human capabilities like creativity and resilience. Furthermore, by viewing ecology and people's lives as inseparably connected by history and practice, I demonstrate how temporalities of environmental, social, economic, and political relations of multidimensional scales take root within local realities in places like Cicia. As I argue, the socio-ecological foundation of rural villages in Fiji provides forms of leverage, not simply to resist political and economic forces, but also to envision social change by contesting conditions of monetary dependency inflicted by capitalism. Contextualized by the economic implications instigated by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, I also discuss the historical resilience of subsistence, village-based economics to not only endure different crises, but creatively demonstrating its radical potential for societal reconfigurations. In order to do so, I have throughout the thesis adopted an Hocartian approach that accounts for the interisland relationships of Lau that are integral to the sociality of subsistence economics on Cicia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest and appreciation of island societies in the Pacific grew exceptionally through my ten months as an exchange student in Fiji at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in 2018. While taking courses at USP in political science and Pacific studies, I was exposed to some powerful approaches that lecturers and fellow students applied to view historic and contemporary trajectories of world events from their Pacific perspectives. Experiences like these inspired me to return to the Pacific for fieldwork after being enrolled into the master's program of social anthropology at the University of Bergen (UiB) in 2019. Over the past two years, I designed my own research project, conducted fieldwork in Fiji, analyzed materials and literature, and completed the writing of this thesis. However, this accomplishment would never have been achieved without the help and support from the people who directly or indirectly assisted me throughout this journey.

First, let me begin by thanking the people of Cicia. The generosity of providing me the opportunity to spend time together in your everyday tasks and activities is what made the writing of this thesis possible. I am particularly grateful for the people of Mabula village who allowed me to stay in their community while conducting fieldwork. Hopefully, we can meet again soon. *Vinaka vakalevu*. I also want to thank my academic advisor Professor Edvard Hviding. Your encouraging guidance and constructive comments have been both immensely productive and inspiring. The continual supervision, in a turbulent year of pandemic-related implications that severely affected circumstances of fieldwork and the semesters of writing, has been greatly appreciated. Furthermore, I must express my thankfulness for the great assistance of Susana Vulawalu, who, as my fieldwork companion for the first three weeks in Mabula, helped me initiate my research on Cicia. Moreover, by continuing our dialogue after I left Fiji early due to the pandemic, you directly supported me throughout the entire writing process by offering fruitful contributions, feedback, and words of encouragement. For all this and more, I owe you a great deal of personal and academic gratitude. A special thanks also goes to my co-supervisor Dr. Stuart Kininmonth, who assisted with networking and the facilitation of my fieldwork through USP in Suva, Fiji. Most importantly, in addition to inspiring conversations about marine science, you introduced me to Susana who turned to have the immeasurable value to the research and writing process of this thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the other members from the Department of Social Anthropology at UiB, who throughout this writing process shared different ideas, perspectives, and suggestions. Thanks to Nora Haukali for sharing many helpful advice through your own experience of conducting fieldwork in Fiji. Also, thanks to Miriam Ladstein for helping with various practicalities related to the preparation of fieldwork. To all my other friends and fellow students from UiB and USP; thank you for the inspiring conversations and discussions, and a special thanks to those of you who provided me with feedback on early drafts of this thesis at seminars. Moreover, thanks to my sister Cecilie Larsen and my good friend Erik Nordnes Einum for taking the time to help me with proofreading. I also want to thank the interdisciplinary Island Lives, Ocean States research project for funding parts of my fieldwork in Fiji. And last, but by no means least, I would not have been able to write this thesis had it not been for the enormous support and encouragement received from my closest family; my mom, dad, sister, brother and our two border collies.

Thank you all.

Håkon Larsen
Arendal, July 2021

PROLOG

Soaring above the deep-blue waters of the Koro Sea, after departing on the weekly Twin Otter flight from Nausori Airport on Fiji's main island Viti Levu, I anxiously watched the passing islands below from my window, wondering how the next months would unravel. Two rows in front, Susana would turn her head around to share an expression of excitement before she refocused out on the ocean, contoured by turquoise coral reef lagoons surrounding different islands. After little less than an hour of flight time, we spotted Cicia in the distance through the cockpit windows in front, that was not obstructed by any door to separate the aircraft cabin. On our approach, the pilots took a wide turn, circling clockwise over the island with passenger windows tilted down towards its green but also dry-patched valleys and forest interior landscape. As we rounded the south-eastern bend of Cicia, Mabula village soon came into sight alongside the south end of the coast (*figure 1*). The nerves were tense as I distantly observed the village where I would be stationed over the coming time.

The propeller airplane descended and touched down softly onto the cut out stretch of grass runway among the tightly packed coastline of coconut palms. Susana and I disembarked as the aircraft came to a halt and opened its doors to us and the seven other passengers. As there is just one weekly flight operating between Viti Levu and Cicia, many people often gather around the small airport to receive returning family members and to send or collect airmail. As we walked out of the plane "*Pālagi*¹, *pālagi*" had been spreading by young kids standing behind the boundary fence on the parking lot side, we were later informed. Unaware of whom to approach, I followed Susana's lead after collecting our bags, out to a white and dusty Toyota pickup truck where her cousin Epeli awaited us to help load the luggage onto the cargo bed. Next to the parking lot, a wide poster erected onto a pair of rounded steel pillars read out "Welcome to the Organic Island of Cicia." In the bottom right corner, signed by local, regional, and international contributing organizations, one could further read the pledge of Cicia to guarantee an island where its "products are grown under the principles of health, ecology, fairness, care, culture and traditions." Having stowed our bags, we took a seat in the back of the

¹ Translates to "foreigner" and is often used to describe people with European appearance. The word *pālagi* is found within the Samoan and Tongan languages, while *vulagi/kaivalagi* has similar meaning in Fijian. The usage of *pālagi* over *vulagi* in this instance either reflect the historic and linguistic traces of Tongan pre-colonial influence on Cicia or simply the contemporary influence by the cosmopolitan capital of Suva in Fiji.

truck and Epeli drove us off towards Mabula. As we reached the village, we pulled up in front of Susana’s grandparents’ house where we were greeted and requested to enter the side entrance to sit down on the handwoven pandanus floormat to eat a freshly cooked meal of *lairo* (Fijian land crab) served whole with a side of taro and fish boiled in coconut milk. While chewing a mouthful of crab meat, I nodded in confirmation when Susana’s grandmother Vilisi asked whether I found the food to be of good taste. Vilisi followingly replied “*vinaka*” (thank you) and subsequently stressed its tastefulness by voicing “it’s organic!”



Figure 1 Cicia Island from the sky, with the many of houses of Mabula village visible close to the center-right of the picture. Behind Cicia, the island of Mago is best visible – behind it Kanacea is to its left and Vanua Balavu to its right. Photo by author.

This thesis is a product of very special circumstances. With expectations to stay four months to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on Cicia, I had no idea how drastically these plans would change following the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. After only five weeks of staying in Mabula, the pandemic would not just force me to leave Cicia early. More fundamentally to the research project, the circumstances required epistemological and methodological improvisations that deviates from how conventional anthropological fieldwork is typically

defined by its approach of long-term participant observation. Although my weeks in Fiji were intense and valuable in terms of data collection, the resulting alterations would challenge me to incorporate secondary literature of nearby islands with an extensive historical scope. This would become a crucial model to analyze questions of research by forming an historical perspective to my own empirical materials. By this epistemological resolution, the thesis presents an anthropological analysis with a comparative scope that tries to methodologically combine associative features of time and space. While I first perceived this to be a necessary remedy to a disrupted fieldwork during extraordinary circumstances, I believe the outcome demonstrates how literature from the past can be reengaged in the present to analyze new inquiries of research.

MAP OF FIJI

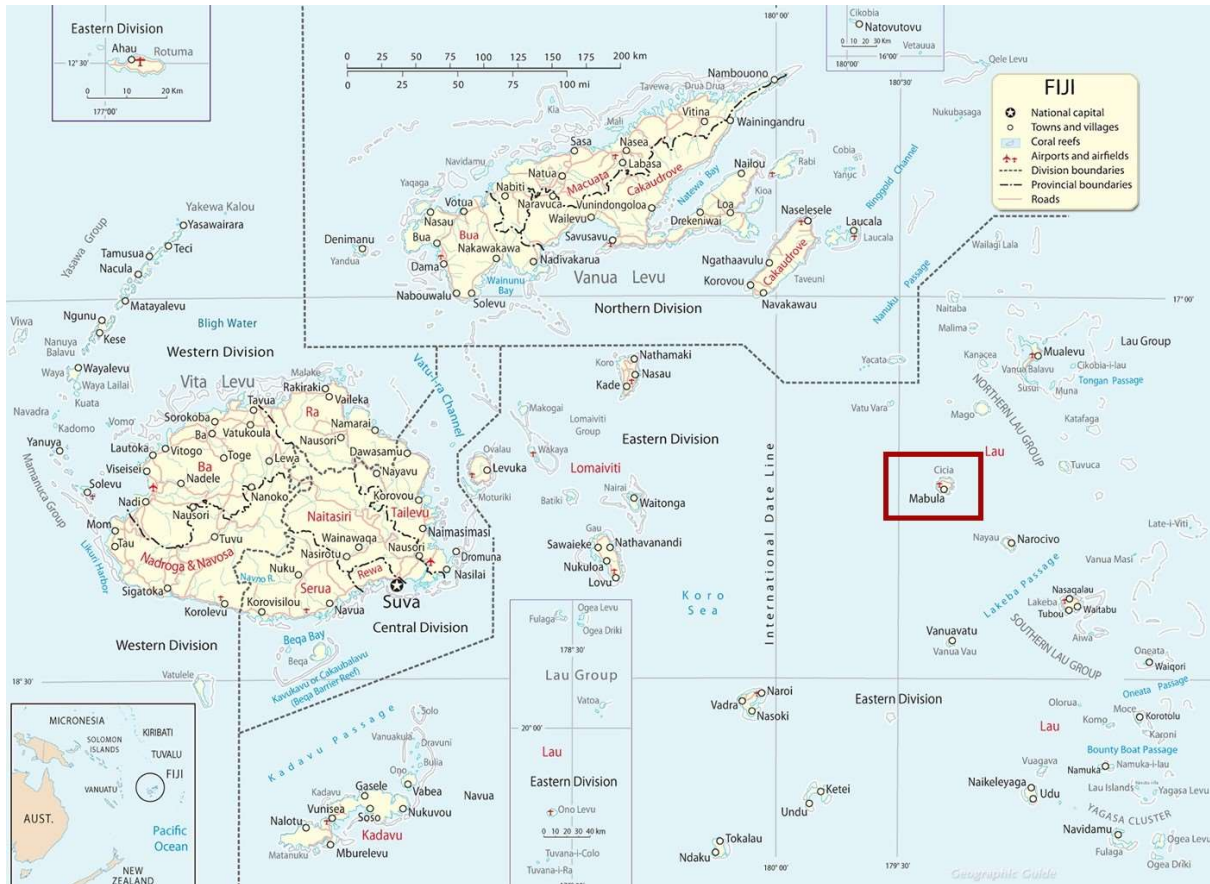


Figure 2 Map of Fiji, where the island of Cicia and Mabula village are marked by the red rectangle, northwest of the Lakeba Passage in the Lau Group (www.ontheworldmap.com), edited by author.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an ethnographic account which aims to demonstrate the significance of subsistence economics among coastal indigenous iTaukei Fijians. Primarily based on fieldwork conducted on the volcanic and ‘organically certified’ island of Cicia in Mabula village, located in the Lau Archipelago in the eastern division of Fiji, the study sets out to examine the unique value of sea and land resources by exploring the broader sociocultural significance that these ecological foundations manifest in people’s everyday lives. My initial aim of the fieldwork was to research the importance of fishing practices to rural villagers, contextualized by ecological alterations to coral reefs that are caused by unfolding effects of global climate change. Yet, from the moment one arrives at Cicia and begins conversing with its people, one cannot evade asking the impending question which today permeates much of everyday village life; why is an island in Fiji ‘organic’? Declared an ‘organic island’ in 2013 by the Fijian government, following an authorization on banning chemical fertilizers and pesticides in local farm practices, Cicia became the first of its kind in the South Pacific to ever be certified as such. In collaboration with a wide array of development actors, the goal was to increase commercial activities by encouraging the exportation of local farm produce. However, with the habitual perception of Fijians to view sea and land binaries as unsolidified, there is a widespread prevalence among people of Cicia to apply the word organic in a multitude of innovative and socially significant ways, culturally underpinned by an ontology that integrates everyday activities, human-environmental relations, and history.

While the organic serendipity would prove to persuasively capture a substantial amount of my research attention, practices related to subsistence fishing remain central.² I did, however, find it as an empirical necessity to expand my scope of inquiry to include a broader template of everyday life on Cicia, where interconnected features of fishing and other village practices are methodologically integrated. As my research agenda immediately got changed, so was the

² See Howell (2017) on the importance of serendipity to the anthropological discipline to make accidental and surprising ethnographic discoveries during fieldwork.

situational circumstances of the fieldwork itself. Consequences of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 created not only problems for sustained participant observation – where physical presence with interlocutors is valued as key – it also altered the concentration of research questions. In the Pacific Islands, climate change remains an essential component to any contextualizing basis of researching the contemporary importance of subsistence economic resources. With the anticipated effects of global warming on rising sea levels and increased sea-surface temperatures, in addition to ocean acidification and changes in storm patterns, food sources of coral reefs are increasingly threatened in places like the tropical Pacific (see Barnett and Campbell 2010). Nevertheless, urgencies catalyzed by the pandemic, and subsequent consequences of social lockdowns, fundamentally shifted the nature of fieldwork and my access to data. With the unreliable future of air travel and recommendations to return home from the University of Bergen, the pandemic forced me to repatriate to Norway in late March of 2020, approximately three months ahead of what my initial plans were. I was, however, disinclined to conclude that the pandemic ended my fieldwork. Instead, I decided to prolong my engagement with interlocutors through digital media and began following grassroots responses to the pandemic in Fiji, being attentive to the significant role of subsistence resources in mitigating economic tensions instigated by the global crisis. Although climate change is therefore less central (while remaining implicitly imperative) to this thesis, I firmly believe that discussing relations between people and ecology during a pandemic is both beneficial to understanding both the resilience of local communities and to highlight the urgency of potential climate change implications.

The main empirical data for the account and analysis that follow remains grounded in the time spent in the village of Mabula. Fortunately, having arrived in early January, I completed eleven weeks of research in Fiji, five of which were conducted on Cicia. The other weeks were predominantly spent in the capital of Suva, where upon my arrival to Fiji I networked through the University of the South Pacific (USP), met with NGO conservationists, and interacted with numerous people from different walks of life – in particular at the municipal fish market in downtown Suva. Additionally, by supplementing my ethnography with comparative sources from eastern Fiji, I integrate an historical perspective of change and continuity to comprehend dynamics of interisland sociality and subsistence economics in the island group of Lau. By examining contingent features of ecology, kinship, cosmology, politics, and history, the thesis aims to uncover how creativity and resilience are founded in the everyday forms of subsistence economic practices. Moreover, the thesis seeks to explain how these capacities are manifested

by cultural displays of sociality and knowledge through connective dimensions to the material and immaterial encapsulation of the Lau Archipelago. Throughout the thesis, I will argue that an inter-relational solidarity is observable in the island group which is not simply founded on abstract ideas of equality and sameness, but by deep-rooted social practices and commitments of reciprocity, in addition to an unequal distribution of different resources.

METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

INITIATION OF FIELDWORK

Before arriving at Cicia, the initial weeks in Fiji involved obtaining access to a village where I could conduct my research. One key element of my planned fieldwork was to live together with coastal Fijians on a day-to-day basis, using the methodology of participant observation to grasp a wider comprehension of socially significant aspects of fishing. To do so, I began networking with professors and students at the University of the South Pacific (USP) to find a suitable location. After a few weeks, my co-supervisor Dr. Stuart Kininmonth acquainted me with Susana Vulawalu, a marine science postgraduate student with relatives living in different parts of Fiji who also looked for a place to conduct her own research project. Stuart advised that it would be advantageous if we travelled to the same site, as it would help in facilitating my research as an outsider, in addition to giving both our individual project an interdisciplinary element. I would provide Susana with insights from the methodological approaches of social anthropology, while she complemented my information with observations from a marine science perspective on fish biomass and coral reef systems.

Together we agreed on Cicia as our field site, where Susana arranged a place for us to stay in Mabula through relatives of her father who was himself from the village. We did consider other places where Susana had other relatives, such as Kadavu in southern Fiji and Vanua Balavu located northeast of Cicia. Cicia was favored because we considered the island to be more manageable for our research purposes as it is smaller in geographical and demographic scales and thus, we supposed, easier to form a comprehensive understanding holistically from. Additionally, with just one weekly flight and a monthly ferry operating between Cicia and the capital of Suva on Viti Levu, Stuart and Susana suggested that it would be easier to build rapport with people there, as they were less inclined to travel to Suva often, in contrast to places like Kadavu where ferries are operating more frequently.

When conducting fieldwork and doing participant observation as an outsider, gatekeepers are integral components to be granted admission to field sites and interlocutors. A gatekeeper, Zahle (2017:474) notes, is an individual who possesses a certain “control over the access to the organization or group” that the researcher wants to study. In other words, gatekeepers can facilitate passage for outside researchers to study localities that otherwise would not be easily accessible. Susana would conduct a shorter fieldwork for just three weeks before returning to Suva. Meanwhile, she fulfilled the gatekeeping role for the initiation phase of my fieldwork by assisting the building of rapport with interlocutors. First and foremost, Susana arranged the host family for us through her grandparents Vilisi and Noa who took great care of me also after Susana left Cicia. Although my host family arranged a different house further into the village mainly reserved for visiting relatives, where I could better store my belongings, I spent most hours with them and their closest kinfolks. This granted me the chance to partake in a variety of everyday activities and conversations, in addition to being introduced to many others of different occupations of all genders and age groups who became central interlocutors.

Secondly, Susana helped diminishing the linguistic barrier of my inability to speak the Fijian language. While nearly all people of Fiji do speak English, since it is a former colony that remained under British rule until gaining independence in 1970, most daily conversations in the village were in Fijian. Susana assisted with translations when needed and explained situations, customs and so forth when I was unable to comprehend topics of discussion. Working close with a native speaker does, however, form some hindrances to establishing rapport with interlocutors. This fieldwork dynamic has been thoroughly explored in earlier work, most notably perhaps by Berreman (1962) who found that his informants in a Himalayan village would act differently according to the identity of his translator. In my case, I experienced that after my Susana left, people began speaking more directly to me. Early on some confessed shyness of speaking English, despite being proficient speakers, and preferred speaking Fijian through Susana’s translations. Although Susana’s presence provided me with pathways to central insights and findings, her departure enabled me to familiarize myself more in-depth with interlocutors.

To be granted access to conduct research in a Fijian village, neither formal research permits (which I obtained by enrolling myself as an international student through USP) nor a gatekeeper are sufficient alone. Fijian villages are sites which involve specific, local protocols for engagement. A customary *sevusevu* was performed by having me present a bundle of dried *yaqona* (*Piper methysticum*) roots, known as kava, to the village chief in requesting permission

to stay in the village. Furthermore, as a family was arranged to host me, a second *sevusevu* was presented to their *mataqali* (clan), in addition to other gifts of household items to my host family specifically, as they became the *tatau* (primary caretakers) throughout my stay.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The weeks spent on Cicia were surprisingly productive in terms of data collection, much resulting from the fact that Susana eased the process of networking with both women and men, in addition to making me aware of subtleties that would otherwise be difficult to capture as an outsider with limited experience in the field. Having read my research proposal, Susana had a general idea of my fieldwork interests, and it is more than fair to say that without her assistance the empirical materials of this thesis would have been significantly poorer, considering the shortened length of my stay in Mabula due to the pandemic. However, while the collection of data was for the most part productive, there were some methodological obstacles to the fieldwork which I encountered.

In discussing fieldwork safety, Schwandner-Sivers (2009) explains how she negotiated her role as a researcher in Albania and Kosovo to find ‘safe spaces’ that ensured her protection in the field. During my fieldwork, I encountered a somewhat different dilemma regarding fieldwork safety and safe spaces. Rather than negotiating my role as a researcher to secure a safe space to work from, I had to negotiate my role in a secured safe space predefined by interlocutors. One central expectation I had for my fieldwork was to accompany people when and where they went fishing. By participating with interlocutors, we entangle ourselves in their lives with the aim to reach a certain level of immersion by the engaged exercises of practical knowledge within the given community (Zahle 2012:51-59). In doing so, by being shown aspects of society alongside people themselves, anthropologists do not aim to understand the world through a biological prism of the organic nature “as it really is”, but to discover the “diverse ways in which constituents of the natural world figure in the imagined, or so-called ‘cognised’ worlds of cultural subjects” (Ingold 2000:14, 21-22).

This was not a straightforward process in practice. People wanted to ensure that I would not be harmed while conducting research by applying various protective measures. Some of these measures were not restrictively related to fishing but also concerned my general health condition, suggesting for instance to send me to the local health station if I informed them that I experienced a minor headache. These concerns sometimes snowballed into larger issues of

discussion, such as questioning my capacity to withstand heat from the sun. This subsequently shifted into the participative fieldwork domain of fishing, as I would be exposed to direct sunlight for several hours. I negotiated past this by reassuring people that I applied enough sunscreen and used UV-protective clothing when fishing.

Convincing people of my capacity as a relatively proficient swimmer was a larger struggle. To some extent, this was rooted in more legitimate concerns of risks as ocean currents at different fishing spots could become very strong and – if not carefully watched – potentially dangerous. Interlocutors insisted that I began swimming and fishing with them on the inside of reefs where currents would be calmer. This led me to question my participative role in subsistence fishing practices; was my presence a burden? To a certain extent, it undoubtedly was. Firstly, people kept eyes on me to make sure that I was not struggling in the water. Secondly, my presence could have prevented them from going to more preferable locations where currents are stronger but where fishing is better. In this manner, interlocutors would select spaces for me to safely participate in, away from where they otherwise would prefer to fish.

I therefore had to prove my capacities as a competent swimmer to gain trust, making myself useful in the water by helping with gear and holding catch. In anthropological discussions regarding the importance of trust, it is often referred to the trustfulness the anthropologist seeks to make interlocutors comfortable sharing personal insights, thoughts, and stories. In this situation, I had to build trust by convincing fishermen that I was capable enough to join them in deeper waters. As my fieldwork in Cicia was disrupted by the pandemic, I cannot claim to have fulfilled such an accomplishment of trust. However, by undertaking an apprenticeship role of fishing under the guidance of a host uncle, I took important steps to prove my capabilities. Starting out by learning how to spearfish off the beach, I was later able to join fishermen in stronger currents deeper out on the ocean.

SHIFTING METHODOLOGICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

After making research progress on Cicia, the fieldwork circumstances drastically shifted as the coronavirus pandemic forced my early repatriation to Norway. Yet, I remained reluctant to define the pandemic as the endpoint of my fieldwork. Although most interlocutors from Cicia did not have internet connectivity, some of them did, and from Norway I managed to stay somewhat updated on others through those few with access to Facebook and WhatsApp. Through these media I conducted informal interviews and followed how people experienced

the coronavirus pandemic in Fiji. What relevance this would have regarding my research focus on subsistence economic practices was not apparent at first. This quickly changed in late April upon discovering a massive grassroots initiative on Facebook, with the establishment of an exchange group called Barter for Better Fiji (BBF). Responding to the economic recession people across Fiji began experiencing, with thousands of people losing their sources of income due to the disintegration of the formal labor market, resulting primarily from the near total collapse of the country's tourism industry, BBF facilitated non-monetary forms of exchange that enabled subsistence produce to be frequently traded for typically cash-related items and services.

Having been granted permission from BBF's administration to conduct digital fieldwork by observing group activities, in addition to contacting group participants, I began noticing several dynamics which resembled observational data from my stay in Mabula as well as historical literature from Lau, that highlighted similar key roles and potentials of subsistence economics. In this manner, digital media provided me with an opportunity to continue some research despite of my physical departure from Fiji. However, as Miller et al. (2016) argues, to fully understand the phenomena of social media, we must also account for the dynamic and underlying sociocultural conditions of digital expressions. Technologies and digital platforms are not necessarily causative, but rather a new scaling of sociality where the visual of digitality becomes a new form of cultural and social communication (Miller et al. 2016:6-7). In other words, we still face the pressing concern of accounting for underlying societal elements that are being expressed through these media. The local economic responses in Fiji to the pandemic had been more difficult to comprehend without my on-ground observational information from Cicia and Suva. I could therefore conduct digital fieldwork, but mainly because I already was exposed to similar analogous phenomena. Hence, despite the value of digital anthropology in a time of restrictive travel and physical engagements, the central importance of non-digital ethnographic fieldwork remained imperative to this thesis.

ETHICS AND DATA COLLECTION

Throughout my fieldwork, the main methodology to register ethnographic information was primarily done by taking handwritten notes during and after different engagements with interlocutors. As much of my participative objective was to join interlocutors in their daily practices (like fishing) much needed to be written afterwards for obvious practical reasons. I only used a tape recorder once for one semi-structured interview in Mabula. Days after taking

fieldnotes, I would often revise and reflect on my initial writing. I found this way of working insightful, as it provided reflective distance to my preliminary perceptions of different events and conversations that unfolded, which I could further expand on by elaborative writing.

A great deal of the information obtained was gathered late at night, drinking kava with interlocutors from Mabula during what many people in the Pacific refer to as *talanoa*. *Talanoa* has been described as “a respectful, reciprocating interaction” where “one listens to the other” (Vaioleti 2006:26). Conversations of *talanoa* are informal in character but provides a social space where various issues can be raised, listened to, and discussed. Instead of approaching conversations as an extraction of information, *talanoa* facilitates the sharing of insights, histories, and hypothesis, often by ways of storytelling (Vaioleti 2006:22). As Vaioleti argues, *talanoa* “places the power to define what the Pacific issues are within the encounter between the researcher and the participant” (2006:26). Instead of excavating information from interlocutors, I found this way of conducting research not only ethically compelling, but also very productive as people seemed comfortable and motivated by being given the opportunity to share insights on their own premises.

I initially had some concerns that my constant presence in the field by residing in Mabula would lead to an obscuring of the research conducted and complicate the preservation of interlocutors’ consent to collect information. However, to my surprise interlocutors would themselves often eagerly remind me to note things down or for example raise helpful questions to make seemingly irrelevant topics of conversation applicable to my research. Others would readily suggest places I should go and spontaneously introduce me to people they believed I should meet. Admittedly, in my state of confusion as an outsider working to adapt to a new lifestyle in the rural village of Mabula, some interlocutors seemed at times to have a greater understanding of my own research than I did myself.

Although the identity of Susana Vulawalu as my fieldwork companion and gatekeeper is consensually disclosed, I have throughout the thesis used different measures of anonymization by applying pseudonyms to interlocutors, in addition to mixing some events and people where I considered it appropriate and necessary to protect the privacy of people. In this process, I have worked to ensure that empirical mixtures do not lead to alternate conclusions nor ethnographic inaccuracies. This is, however, more complicated in presenting ethnography from digital fieldwork. While BBF has accumulated an enormous base of members that will be discussed in detail in chapter five, people can easily be recognized through Facebook’s search engine if certain specific information is identified. In attempting to resolve this dilemma, I slightly altered

and merged empirical details by constructing “composite” figures from my virtual observational data (see Hopkins 1996 [1993]). Yet, I remained uncertain in knowing whether the confidentiality of privacy and information was adequately secured or not. Thus, I have decided to not present my digital materials by referring to any group members specifically – even as composite figures – but instead, discussing the larger significances of BBF by focusing on the broader social dynamics manifested by group activities in general.

There will always be some restrictions to how well anonymization can be practically done in small island communities like Cicia, without producing an overtly generic account by removing all forms of contextual clues within the ethnography. Thus, while pseudonyms are carefully applied, there is one exception besides Susana Vulawalu where I do disclose the full name of one interlocutor, whose name is Susana Yalikanacea. Not only is Susana central to important ethnographic revelations in this thesis, but she is also a publicly outspoken figure who regularly interacts with journalists who request her to comment on different occurrences on the island. Applying a pseudonym for anonymization would be insufficient as an internet search of the ethnographical data would quickly reveal her identity on Fijian news sites. If I were to apply other measures to make her identity unrecognizable, it would entail procedures to drastically alter the empirical material itself and thus generate what I would consider severe ethnographic misrepresentations. In dialogue with Susana, to ensure that this decision is conducted in an ethically considerate way, none of the accounts involving her are substantially different to what she has or could have spoken about publicly in media.

AN HOCARTIAN APPROACH

While the physical fieldwork on Cicia did dispense several case studies to investigate for this thesis, in addition to digital research, the shortened duration of actual fieldwork still left me with unexamined questions. To compensate for empirical gaps, I incorporate historic comparative ethnography from Lau to elaborate on central topics of research. There are particularly three sources of different time periods which are frequently raised as supplementary materials to build a narrative of interisland sociality in Lau. Having worked as a schoolmaster on the island of Lakeba in the early 1910s, Arthur M. Hocart authored extensive ethnographic accounts from research conducted on many different islands of Lau, including Cicia (see Hocart 1929). The island group of Lau makes up a chain of around sixty islands (thirteen of which

today are inhabited by around 9,500 people in total³) of different sizes and typologies stretching nearly 225 nautical miles from north to south. With past fieldwork experience from the Solomon Islands, studying islanders there who found themselves in an acute period of transcending into a colonial socio-political lifeworld, Hocart operated a broad regional perspective to document cultural diversification in Fiji (see Hviding and Berg 2014). His comparative ethnography represented numerous perspectives from various islands, which fostered a reluctance to generalize by making space for interisland specificity and distinction in his writing (Hviding 2014:94).

To advance the comparative perspective historically, I have interpreted the (often hyper-empirical) literature of Hocart while simultaneously immersing myself with ethnography from Moala (located west of Lau) written by Marshall Sahlins (1962) and in the joint work of Bayliss-Smith et al. (1988) concerning a broader perspective on interisland relations in eastern Fiji. While the field study by Sahlins covers a period two generations after the work of Hocart, the work of Bayliss-Smith et al. is contextualized by the post-colonial experience in Fiji, following the country's independence in 1970. The studies by Sahlins and Bayliss-Smith et al. were, similarly to Hocart, preoccupied with questions regarding regional similarities and differences in forming an interisland sociality. By considering associative features of custom, ecology, polity, particularly magnified by kinship practices, the studies elucidate the historic centrality of subsistence economic resources to the social formation of the Lau Archipelago.

Hocart was in many ways ahead of his time in terms of his ethnographical contributions, overshadowed by those conventionally perceived as the foundational pillars of the modern anthropological discipline and its methodology, such as Bronislaw Malinowski. Engaged with an observational methodology to study intersubjective processes and social interactions, Hocart's approach resembles dimensions of what much later established itself as postmodernism (Hviding 2014:83-84). Primarily situated on Lakeba, the center of the old Lakeban chiefdom which today remain the paramount chiefly island of Lau, Hocart found himself amid a group of people highly reflective of their past in attempt to socially position themselves within a colonial lifeworld. While diffusionism dominated anthropological theories at the time, Hocart (1929) seemed to be much more of a relationist, consistently attentive to social positions and the divinity of power. For instance, Sahlins argued how Hocart's proposition demonstrated the generative encompassment of rituals and beliefs to establish

³ See Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2018) for the most recent census of Fiji.

relations of authority, having the “cosmic systems of governmentality” engaged in societies long before the classic state formation was instituted in Fiji (Sahlins 2017:24). By extensive documentations, Hocart illustrated how the sociality of Lauan islands were not formed as isolated cultural entities, but rather generated through the continual engagements of people, places, cosmologies, and resources found both nearby and far away.

That is not to say that the Lauan sociality has been unaffected by external forces throughout history. Perhaps most notably, it is explained that the frequency of interisland contacts among people was severely reduced following the conquest of eastern Fiji by the Tongan prince Enele Ma`afu in the mid-1800s (see Spurway 2015). By instituting a scheme of taxation, Ma`afu ruled communities to transfigure the local modes of production to prioritize copra and in doing so shifting attention away from the resource diversification of islands and regional specialization, which had been some of the main driving components to interisland exchange (Sahlins 1962:36-37, 420). Following the British annexation of 1874, colonialism further exacerbated interisland fractures by means of economic reorientation as the British redirected and centralized trade routes westwards to the old capital of Levuka (and later Suva) in order to facilitate copra exportation to Europe (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:141). Paradoxically, as settlements previously located inland were moved closer to the coast – easing copra trade for the emerging colonial economy – mobility beyond these coastlines became increasingly constrained. That said, despite strains and impairments, interisland sociality does remain important to the everyday life of Lauan people.

Today there are five villages in total on Cicia, populated by roughly one thousand people. Spread around the entire coast, the villages are connected by one gravel road stretching around the shoreline, except for the northernmost part of the island where the road winds up through the interior valleys, connecting the villages of Tarakua and Lomaji. As visualized by the picture from the opening vignette (*figure 1*), neighboring islands of Lau are situated close enough that they are observable also on the ground. Mabula is the chiefly village of Cicia, meaning they decide who will be installed as the leading chief of the island. It is, however, not uncommon that the chief of Cicia resides in a different village, if he is related to the noble *mataqali* of Mabula who hold the island’s high chief position (Tui Cicia). Although my research primarily is based on fieldwork from Cicia, in particular Mabula village, following the Hocartian approach, no village nor island in Lau is to be understood in isolation. Neglecting the relevance of intervillage and interisland relations would essentialize and obscure how diverse forms of activities are manifested in people’s everyday lives. Most interisland mobility is now

configured towards the urban center of Suva by the ferry and airplane schedules. Still, as chapters of this thesis will demonstrate, the historic relevance of outward mobility at sea persists in various cultural forms, linking people of Lau through social features of kinship and subsistence economics.

The integrative role of the ocean should not be understated. By contemporary practices, the sea enables a connective space for the “fluid foundation to sociality” where people and their relations are formed by a multi-local reality that maritime travel both generates and maintains (Hviding 2015:138). As illustrated by the famous “sea of islands” concept of Hau’ofa (1993), the islands of Oceania were not separated by the sea, but rather interconnected by cultural engagements of maritime travel. While this view is usually applied to the Pacific lifeworld at large, as Hviding argues with regards to the New Georgia group, seas of islands are also found in more spatially concentrated areas where social and economic lives were nevertheless lived in ways that were “truly archipelagic” (Hviding 2015:124). Similarly, the Lau Archipelago is a sea of islands on its own within the larger cultural encompassment of Oceania. There is “no confined locality” to observe, as geographical diversity necessitated interactive mobility across the sea by practices of marriage, exchange, warfare, and so forth (Hviding 2014:88). Thus, places like Mabula are better conceptualized as multifaceted nodes of interconnections. Methodologically, the village then becomes a site “to reside and a point from which the anthropologist moves out along the lines of social relations” (Kapferer 2000:28). By presenting a multi-local perspective, this thesis covers ways in which places like Mabula have been – and still are – entangled materially and immaterially by the complex movements of people, beliefs, and resources.

THEMATIC FOCUS AND ARGUMENT

In 2018, the nonprofit environmental organization Conservation International laid out an arrangement of plans under the Lau Seascape Strategy, to conserve the terrestrial and marine biodiversity of Lau (Conservation International 2018). With goals of sustainable development, the initiative has set targets for the year of 2030 to increase climate change resilience by bolstering food security in the region. Although the strategy has a clear predisposition by its conservation driven interest in the biological features of the island group, the seascape conception is greatly suitable to the holistic worldview of people in places like Cicia. The Lau seascape can be viewed not simply as a composition of biological ecosystems, but a

sociocultural amalgamation that interconnects the environment with the habitus of people's everyday practices. In doing so, it illustratively breaks with the nature/culture dichotomy that handles environmental issues as separated from social issues which, in the words of Rudiak-Gould; "divorces humans from the world in which they live" (Rudiak-Gould 2016:263).

Seeing ecology and people's lives as inseparably connected, enables us to form an understanding to how temporalities of environmental, social, economic, and political relations of multidimensional scales take root within local realities and practices in places like Cicia. My argument is that the village-based subsistence economy is a social domain which comprises much more than nutritional features. Subsistence practices are not narrowly concerted to the human necessity for material survival, but more broadly to a cultural endurance by repetition of central activities in which nutritional resources play part in the "long conversation" of everyday life (see Bloch 1977). Moreover, ecological resources are on Cicia underpinned by extensive sets of knowledge practices, social relations, and the human-environmental encompassment of the Lau seascape. By accounting for social values of sea and land resources manifested in people's everyday activities, we can perceive ecology as a material foundation to human capabilities, such as creativity and resilience. As will be argued, the socio-ecological foundation of rural villages in Fiji provides forms of leverage, not simply to resist political and economic forces, but also to envision social change by contesting conditions of monetary dependency inflicted by the capitalist economy. Additionally, I will discuss the historical resilience of subsistence, village-based economics to not only endure different crises, but creatively demonstrating its radical potential for societal reconfiguration. Before proceeding to the chapter overview, I should now discuss some important features related to the Fijian sociality of subsistence economics.

THE SOCIALITY OF SUBSISTENCE ECONOMICS AND LAND TENURE

The thesis will show how everyday forms of village practices on Cicia are contingent upon two multifaceted and interconnected features. Firstly, the ecology of land and sea which fundamentally permits a material foundation to different activities and creative arrangements. Secondly, notions of kinship in which these ecological resources are engaged and contested by various social processes. I should briefly note that the thesis does not primarily consider the organized genealogies of Fijian kinship. Genealogical charts of kinship organization have by anthropologists, Ingold observed, commonly been shown as "sequences of dots" (Ingold 2016:3). Dotted lines give us the impression that societal positions are fixed to a structural chart,

as fragments assembled by the ethnographer to reconstruct social cohesion onto a document (Ingold 2016:115). By this approach, relations are only narrowly captured, as the marked dots are restrained from moving and thus oversimplify the everyday complexity of social interactions. Instead, by adopting Grønhaug's (1978) concept of scaling, I will progressively through the different chapters shape a multi-scaled ethnography which strives to account for the different and sliding dimensions of interactive, overlapping, and temporal social fields. By doing so, the ethnography aims to explain not just how ecology manifests itself socially in places like Cicia, but also how the environment is "deeply enmeshed in global economic and political processes" that local people actively engage with (Friedman 2005:279). My attention to Fijian sociality then, does not focus on analyzing lines of descent. Rather, it examines people's experiences and perspectives on different social processes and dynamics in which kinship relations are elucidated within the social domain of subsistence activities.

Sahlins (1985) proposed a distinction between what he labeled the prescriptive and performative structures of social relations. His approach stemmed from a discontent with structuralists who attempted to explain acts of people solely based on their prescribed relationships, neglecting how acts themselves can constitute relations (Sahlins 1985:26-27). In Fiji, Sahlins found that foreigners could establish relations of kinship by doing rightful performative acts, typically by associating oneself with the everyday activities of communities (Sahlins 1962:147). Even Fijian chiefs are commonly said to be *vulagi* (strangers) who came from overseas and were ritualized into the paramount position by consuming *yaqona* from the land (Toren 1990:241-242). Furthermore, relations of kinship are embedded in people's spiritual and material connection to the all-embracing land, called *vanua*, which is perceived as the ultimate source of life (Tuwere 2002). By vernacular conceptions, *vanua* also extends into the ocean by incorporating coral reefs – known as *qoliqoli* fishing grounds – which underlines the fundamental inseparability of sea and land in Fiji. The *vanua* is not simply a site that provides the physical basis for the subsistence economy. It comprises also the people themselves and their ancestors belonging to the *vanua* which emphasize the interconnectivity of place and performative kinship relationships in people's everyday practices. As Williksen-Bakker (1990) shows, the *vanua* is associated by ideas of truthful and rightful manners that are followed to live in accordance with land. This is done from early stages of life by, for instance, the planting of the umbilical cord after the birth of a child. The umbilical cord is meant to be planted with a seed or fruit, which when grown into a tree represents the tied connection of the Fijian person into the social landscape of the *vanua* (Williksen-Bakker 1990:235-236). Since

the bond between people and their *vanua* is realized by performative actions, the relationship can also disintegrate if customary practices of kinship are not performed in accordance with the different idealized requirements of their *vanua* (Hulkenberg 2015).

In everyday life, the relations of kinship in Fiji are realized by the daily association of activities through shared households, called *vuvale*, which Hocart defined as “the people who work together” (Hocart 1929:17). Compositions of households are not necessarily defined by who sleeps in the same living quarters, but rather through the contribution of labor and sharing of kitchens. Similarly, the centrality of sharing meals in Fijian villages is the “most salient marker” of membership to a household and is “itself definitive of kinship” (Toren 1990:39). Although Mabula today comprises of five distinct *mataqali* units, practices of intermarriage in addition to the daily association between people of different clans makes relations much more fluid and overlapping in practice, being socially pre-composited by various cultural performances.

Household leaders are usually the oldest men, referred to as *uluni vuvale*, meaning ‘the head of the household’. While relational distinctions of chiefs and commoners are important, it is said that each head is his own chief of the dwelling unit (Sahlins 1962:105). This hierarchical division is manifested by seating arrangements during meals where the *uluni vuvale* is reserved the upper seating position (Toren 1990:62). Thus, while kinship relations are configured by prescriptive labels, they necessitate structural performances by being spatially concretized among people in their everyday practices. Kinship then, as suggested by Sahlins, is the “mutuality of being”, constituted by “a manifold of intersubjective participations” that accommodates for “the various performative modes of relatedness” (Sahlins 2011:10-11).

It is important to underline the relevance of kinship with regards to communal property rights in rural iTaukei villages. Despite disruptions of European settlements and social disengagements produced by the colonial intensification of copra production in places like Lau, iTaukei people were reserved rights of tenure to most land in Fiji. Such land cannot be outright sold as private property, as village communities hold customary ownership of territories as a constitutional right. While property relations have, as argued by Sahlins (1962:126), been viewed as subordinate to social relations among indigenous Fijians, controlling local means of production have certainly been important to Fijian communities during the colonial and post-colonial periods. If we compare, for instance, the dissimilar experience of imperialism in Fiji with that of Hawaii, the consequences of tenure rights become strikingly clear. Coinciding with the dramatic fall in the Hawaiian population – mainly due to exposures of Western diseases – following Captain Cook’s arrival in 1778, indigenous people of Hawaii became internally

displaced as private property was introduced by American businessmen and missionaries, which contributed to significant losses in communal subsistence bases (Friedman 2005:274). As a result, the formalized land grab both disempowered and alienated Hawaiians by disconnecting them from land they previously had been materially and spiritually a part of (see Osorio 2006). Generations of Hawaiians became marginalized within their own land as capitalistic ventures demolished most forms of communal living.

As will be later discussed, the village-based subsistence economic system in Fiji is crucial to how generations of village people have managed to creatively engage with issues of different social scales in their everyday lives. That is not to say that tenure rights are without their own complications in Fiji. For instance, the legal framework of *qoliqoli* fishing grounds has been severely contested and galvanized social conflicts. While agreement was found between British colonizers and chiefs of iTaukei communities to ensure that customary rights were restored to follow the “customs and traditions of the iTaukei”, the settlement failed to realize customary ownership rights to coral reefs (Sloan and Chand 2016:78). Today, coastal iTaukei communities are granted access to fish and to manage their customary *qoliqoli* sites for non-commercial purposes, while the Fijian government holds authority to regulate and change jurisdiction over them. This jurisdictional dynamic was further solidified by the ratification of the 1982 UN Convention of the Law and the Sea (UNCLOS) that established a legal framework to states’ sovereignty of sea governance over Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) that in Fiji includes its 411 *qoliqoli* sites (Sloan and Chand 2016:78-79).

Efforts to restore customary tenure ownership have been attempted but fallen short and instead stirred polarization between groups of iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities. Being descendants of Indian plantation workers brought to Fiji by the British colonists from 1880 to 1916, Indo-Fijians have principally been unable to own land by law as tenure is to follow the customary rights of iTaukei (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:2-3). In 2006, the Fijian government proposed legislation intended to resolve the proclaimed “historical wrong” by transferring the proprietary tenure of *qoliqoli* to the iTaukei (Bryant-Tokalau 2010). Opponents of the bill claimed it neglected and would alienate the Indo-Fijian population by further discriminating property ownership along lines of ethnicity. By then, other controversial legislation had already passed which granted amnesty to a group of iTaukei nationalists who in 2000 helped topple the government of the first Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry.⁴ Subsequently, the

⁴ Two *coup d'états* also took place in 1987 that were similarly mobilized by a nationalist section of the iTaukei who feared the possibility of being deprived of political influence and tenure rights (Ratuva 2002:131).

ruling government was overthrown by another military *coup d'état*, led by the current sitting prime minister Frank Bainimarama on December 5 in 2006 before the Qoliqoli Bill was signed into law (Ratuva and Lawson 2016:191-192). Although the bill was not the only reason for the coup, it highlighted how the political situation in post-colonial Fiji became significantly affected by the controversial historicity of tenure rights.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The ethnography of this thesis explores several interconnected and multi-scaled features of the subsistence economy in Lau by disclosing the interactivity between ecological resources and social practices. Centered around the organic certification of Cicia, the thesis will show how people appropriate the authorization to fit a holistic identity of customary lifestyles that not only encompass local practices but also invokes the sociality of interisland relationships. In search of answers to the seemingly simplistic question as to why an island in Fiji is organic, we must therefore begin at the foundation of Fijian sociality, by considering some of the dynamics which are manifested by central activities in communities like Mabula.

By examining the household sociality of food sharing, I focus in chapter two on some of the tactile features of everyday village interactions by considering dynamics in the subsistence activities of distributing seafood. An analysis of seafood transmission among households uncovers a total social fact of performative Fijian kinship. In a web of social interconnections and commitments, by considering features of equality and hierarchy, “the totality of society” is realized through customary subsistence practices which express the social institutions of kinship, economics, morality, and cosmology (Mauss 1995 [1924]:210-212). In chapter three, I elaborate on the centrality of Fijian sociality in subsistence practices by upscaling the analysis to include the broader template of interisland relationships in Lau. The ethnography will demonstrate how an interisland sociality is affirmed by regional spearfishing practices, where Mabulan spearfishermen fish at customary *qoliqoli* sites of neighboring islands. By examining everyday interactions between people, the environment, and history, we will see how cosmological relations manifested in the subsistence economy generates a logic of interdependency among island neighbors. Furthermore, by discussing anxieties which arises among fishermen when forthcoming marine protection programs are believed to potentially weaken these interisland relationships, I later argue that the expressed subjectivity of

interdependency encapsulates the Fijian sociality of subsistence economics in Lau – which will prove central to how people locally engage with the organic certification on Cicia.

By investigating the social immersion of people and the environmental lifeworld in which they inhabit, one discovers dimensions of the “inescapable condition of existence” (Ingold 2000:153). In doing so, village life on the organic island exposes the multifaceted junctures of globalization, modernization, and tradition from the dwelling perspective of people by examining the intricate multi-scaled engagements of local practices. In chapter four, I resume to analyze how the organic certification of Cicia is used creatively to envision social change by revitalizing cultural practices in Lau. While the organic authorization of the island prohibited chemical fertilizers and pesticides, the practiced usage and application of the organic concept have not been restrictive to agricultural practices. Among people of Cicia, the vernacular interpretation of the certification is also inclusive of customary knowledge and other activities such as construction, fishing and even ambitions of seafaring. In a conversion of subsistence economics, the organic concept is appropriated by local actors and reapplied into a pre-existing conception of the Fijian sociality and cultural history of the Lau seascape which unveils local experiences and responses to processes of modernity and capitalism.

In chapter five, I will discuss the resilience which subsistence-based village economics demonstrates by discussing its capacity to endure crises of various kinds. Contextualized by the coronavirus pandemic, the chapter is based on the economic recession that severely impacted people across Fiji. Following thousands of job losses across the country that highly relied on monetary liquidity derived from the tourism industry, grassroots engagements developed on Facebook to revitalize exchange-based economics, customarily known in Fiji as *veisa*. Through observations of group dynamics on BBF, I found that subsistence resources play an integral role in stimulating group activities. Furthermore, I examine the historic role of subsistence economics in Lau as social buffers to past oscillations in the capitalist world economy and during environmental disasters. Finally, in the epilog I will highlight the main ethnographic and theoretical arguments developed throughout this thesis. By accounting for the social significance of village-based subsistence economics, the section will focus on its material foundation to forms of sociality, creativity, and resilience in places like the organic island of Cicia.

As the ethnography is mostly based on fieldwork conducted on Cicia, an island where the only non-iTaukei people are occasional visiting governmental officials, missionaries, or researchers like me, there is admittedly most certainly an iTaukei-centrism in the empirical data presented.

In attempting to immerse myself in the social life of my iTaukei interlocutors from Lau, questions raised and topics of analysis in which I pursued have at the very least been affected by the nature of my fieldwork and the associated interlocutors of the study. Consequently, when discussing implications by the coronavirus pandemic for instance, I ask the reader to bear in mind that social inequalities of landownership rights connected to politicized dimensions of ethnicity persists in post-colonial Fiji and deserve in future research greater attention than what I manage to present here.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOUSEHOLD SOCIALITY OF FOOD SHARING

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will discuss some fundamental aspects of the everyday life on Cicia by considering how subsistence economic resources are distributed between and beyond household units of Mabula village. By exploring sharing practices of the day-to-day transmission of seafood, the chapter discusses several key elements that takes place before, during and after such interactions. The ethnography is structured around one core event where I was requested to transmit a basin of seafood from a neighbor to my host family. In addition to that event, by supplementing additional and separate empirical data from my fieldwork, the chapter seeks to capture and discuss some of the deeper “principles underlying behaviour” that one can examine using such a case study (Mitchell 1984:237).

More precisely, I examine the distributive sharing of seafood not simply as an exchange of items, but as commitments and manifestations of social relations. Although most of the seafood that has been caught is consumed by household members themselves, it is common to share parts of the catch to close relatives of other households after a day or night of fishing. Being distant from any commercial marketplace, very limited amounts of fish caught on Cicia are sold through cash transactions. Only on rare occasions will a group of men spearfish with the purpose of selling their catch to villagers around the island. On a day-to-day basis, fish is distributed by villagers through non-monetary means. By studying reciprocal obligations that are found within the distributive practice itself, I argue that gifts of seafood are not about reaffirming equality of relations. On the contrary, as Graeber (2012) showed in his work on the history of debt, the centrality of gift relations is that they are built on the continuous process of placing people of relatively equal status into small and dissimilar forms of social obligations to each other.

I will discuss the characteristic ways in which such non-monetary transmissions take place. There has been a tendency within the anthropological literature to privilege the extravagant displays of social interplay when exchanging or transmitting things as gifts. Perhaps this is partly the unfortunate consequence of the otherwise important contribution by Marcel Mauss

(1995 [1924]) where the depiction of excessive gift rituals such as potlatch ceremonies has stuck a bit too well in memory. Nonetheless, I will describe ways where gifts are often transmitted in subdued manners, and how the mutedness of transmissions is not only practical in Mabula, but also reinforces obligatory properties of gifts. Lastly, I resume to question how gift transmissions of seafood can be viewed not only as an establishment of relations through social commitments of reciprocity, but also to perform maintenance of social structures like hierarchy. In doing so, this chapter captures the distributive practices of subsistence seafood as an example of what Mauss suggested to be “*total social facts*” in that they display “the totality of society”, being performative expressions of not only acts alone but also its social institutions of kinship, economics, morality, and cosmology (Mauss 1995 [1924]:210-212).

GENEROSITY OF NEIGHBORING HOUSEHOLDS

Every morning before breakfast, I would walk from the house I resided in, down to the house of Vilisi and Noa to eat. To get there, I usually took the main pathway that runs straight through the entire village between the rows of houses and alongside the village green compound, called the *rara* (see *figure 3*). Houses in Mabula are architecturally diverse, consisting of different materials, shapes, and colors. Some are structures with walls and roofs made of metal sheeting with wooden doors and cutout windows, while others are built with the use of timber. Rectangular cement houses constructed by the Fijian government as part of cyclone reliefs are prevalent throughout the village – serving as material manifestations to environmental destructions of past decades. Customary *bure* houses around the village, which are now mostly used for assemblies and ceremonies, are distinct from the typical Fijian *bure*. In difference to the Fijian *bure*, the short-sided edges of Lauan *bure* are roundly shaped in accordance with the building style influenced by the historic Tongan presence in the region (Hocart 1929:119-126). Thus, despite material variations and changes, houses in Mabula also keep elements of past architectural features.

The walk to Vilisi and Noa would take me approximately three to four minutes to complete without stopping, but as I passed different houses along my way, I began to stop by a few people for a quick chat. “*Yadra, yadra*” (good morning, good morning), people would shout out from their windows and doorways facing the path as I passed, often just as a quick greeting but also to ask me over for various conversations. The early gist of these brief interactions regarded general questions about my research plans in addition to asking me if I was adapting to the

‘village life’ and enjoyed their ‘organic food’. As women were usually busy preparing meals or making their children ready to send them off to school, I would mostly meet young men either leaving to or returning from the subsistence gardens (*teitei*) if they were not eating breakfast themselves. Although I did not want to distract them from their morning routines and tasks, people would continuously call me over almost every morning, which became a great way for me to get to know more people in the village.

Walking then, did not simply become a way to get from one place to another. The fact that my host family provided me a different place to sleep, separated from where we ate, offered me a method to engage with a larger set of the community through a particular and rich way of socializing, by maneuvering through the village on a daily basis. It gave me additional excuses to involve myself in the social life that my neighbors themselves were participating in, as walking can be an interactive “way of being *with* other people” (Lee and Ingold 2006:79). As my neighbors and I became more familiarized with each other over time, morning chats were progressively getting shorter in length but also more substantial in depth. Rather than asking me overtly generalized questions regarding my ‘village experience’, neighbors would ask what my plans for the day were, and share for instance short, nonetheless insightful, accounts of their past night of fishing.

One morning on my way to breakfast, I was stopped by a woman whom I could not remember at the time from previous meetings. She was carrying a basin that contained a large, lobster-like crayfish (*urau*) that her younger son had caught during the night. To my surprise, she handed the basin over and politely instructed me to present it to Vilisi at breakfast. Having brought the basin with me to breakfast, I was questioned by Vilisi and the others present about who had presented me the lobster, indicating that the basin had not been expected. Struggling to recall who the woman was by name, I began describing the house of where she stopped me, which was followed by an almost collective revelation and reassured “oh, of course! It must have been Aunt Luisa”, by Vilisi and the rest. Days later, Luisa would again enthusiastically call me over as she saw me leaving the house for breakfast, to show me another catch that some of her sons had caught at night. They were also cooking some thinly sliced crisps of breadfruit (*utu*) in vegetable oil that she insisted me on tasting, before handing me another basin which contained a sizable blue parrotfish (*bumarawa*) to bring to Vilisi.



Figure 3 The village rara of Mabula at sunset. Photo by author.

COMMITTING OBLIGATIONS THROUGH SOCIAL PRACTICE

The incident of being presented with the task to carry out the transmission of seafood, and the subtext of the responses from my host family as I struggled to recall the name of Luisa, are interesting for multiple reasons. First, although it would perhaps be an exaggeration to describe Vilisi and the others as overly anxious to find out who had sent the lobster with me, it still seemed calmly reassuring to them when we finally figured out it was Aunt Luisa. As argued by Sahlins, there is a useful distinction to recognize between the kindred as a structural category and the performed relations of kinship by means of realizing the frequency of social and economic interactions (Sahlins 1962:171). While it remains true that networks through kinship relations of *mataqali* (clan) units overlap in such an open-ended way within the village, making it almost impossible (at least to my own capacity) to map instances where prescriptive relations are not relevant, it should not be equated to an understanding that people are not closer to some than they are to others. Following Mauss' (1995 [1924]) notion of the gift, such exchanges are not merely the transfer of one material object from the hands of one person or group to somebody else. Gifts also carry reciprocal obligations, which consequently establish or reaffirm social relations and their incorporated moral commitments of repayment. Such obligations are usually not made explicit but are rather subtle elements to the foundation of social relations. The dynamic of reciprocal relations is not a one-to-one exchange that is finalized on the spot,

but an exchange that is delayed in a continuum of broad social principles and moral norms, manifested through kinship, friendship, and neighboring relations across time (Sahlins 1972:191-192).

Although reciprocal relations encompass complex dynamics of social intercourse, for the people of Mabula the practices of exchange are commonsensical due to their moral and communal idea of sharing. By one of my interlocutors, it was explained by the simple, yet compelling reasoning that “one gives because one day, one will need.” Acts of giving do not only establish potentially new relations between a giver and the taker. The important element of reciprocity is that it generates excuses that prolong social relations outside the realm of the exchange itself. While partners of commercial exchange ‘calls it even’ by finalizing a transaction and thus ending their committed relationship of debts, neighbors may on the other hand, as argued by Graeber, defer from canceling each other’s personal debts for that very reason (Graeber 2012:104). One avoids reciprocating the exact same gift, specifically because such acts would consequently reaffirm the attainment of equality between both parties and thus cancel future excuses to have anything to do with one another by social commitments of repayment (Graeber 2012:122-126).

Nevertheless, given the moral obligations embedded in gift exchanges, people tend to seek a degree of social oversight to whom they are relationally closest to. This should not leave the reader with an overt understanding that the number of reciprocal obligations is calculated, measured, or explicitly controlled and counted, because indebtedness is not necessarily regarded socially undesirable. In many ways, being in someone’s personal debt is a manifestation of their shared social relations by the expectations of mutual commitments. However, while in abstract, people operate by emphasizing the general reciprocal ground of sociality on a basis of equality, in practice a person tend to behave in solidarity to a greater extent towards some people than they do to others (Graeber 2012:99). This pattern of behavior is often not characterized as hostility, but rather as an implicit awareness of the obligatory dynamics of reciprocity. While in theory a gift typically appears free and voluntary, its embedded properties nevertheless constrain people to a social web of services by future interactions (Mauss 1995 [1924]:12).

Perhaps where this dynamic is most noticeable in everyday life in Mabula, is in the widespread inclination to decline food invitations from others. Walking through the village, one will frequently be asked if one has not eaten and would like to share a meal. It is said that one should ideally always eat with the head up straight so that one can be aware and precedingly call on

people who pass the front of your house to join the meal. Regardless, an overwhelming majority of people will nearly always decline such invitations by excusing themselves, usually by saying that they have other social commitments they need to oblige. A series of probing subsequently follows, where the inviter often will accentuate the content of the invitation by emphasizing what the person specifically is being offered to eat, while simultaneously being aware through past experiences that the invitation most definitely will be declined by either real or made-up excuses. In fact, the only people I observed who would accept such invitations from my host family were people who they were closely affiliated with, by not simply prescribed kinship relations, but by their performative sharing of everyday labor and times of leisure. The phenomena of offering and declining or accepting food invitations in such manners is conventional throughout Fijian villages, where open invitations of food abstractly display the “compelling obligation of kinship” with the compulsory commitment to invite others and thereby ensuring that “in an ideal sense, one *never* eats alone” (Toren 1990:57).

When gifts of various sorts are not of exclusive mutuality – particularly in situations where gifts are not really needed – people will often steer clear off and avoid if possible as the affirmative gesture of receiving generates “a sense of debt – and hence, inferiority” (Graeber 2012:116). Sahlins demonstrated how the political position of Fijian chiefs are reinforced through practices of redistribution where subsistence resources are allocated to commoners in need; converting a material inequality into social inequality (Sahlins 1962:146). Similarly, debt produced by one-way transactions among households also transect into disparities of prestige, as people perceive it as socially better to give than to be a recipient (Sahlins 1962:210). As a result, people often guard themselves against standing in someone’s personal debt. To an extent, one can say that people of Mabula circumvent the central obligatory commitments of delayed reciprocity by declining food invitations, as a person does not necessarily wish to be indebted to anyone. By the same token, Vilisi and the others sought to resolve whom they had been gifted the seafood from. This was not necessarily because of a strict desire to be able to express gratitude, but also a result of the moral conditions that are founded within gift obligations. Further, as the gift evokes and displays social relations with its inherent principles of norms and moral obligations by being manifested through its presentation, the frequency of social interactivity between certain people can be examined by looking at such practices of exchange. Thus, I argue that by considering the practiced sociality between villagers through gift transmissions of food distribution, the revealed intensities and closeness of those relations are performatively observable beyond their prescriptive context of kinship affiliations.

MAINTAINING RELATIONS BY DISTRIBUTING CATCH

This latter observation is also evident on a village scale following the days after the annual *duna taga* (the catching of the eels) in Mabula. The event takes place at some point between February and March when the island has experienced enough heavy rainfall, making the flow of Sakalai river breach the river mouth by the beach, that further enables eels to move down at night. During days of heavy rain, one man from the village is responsible for monitoring water levels in the river at daytime to project if eels will emerge. Because the *duna taga* event relies on rainfall, there are years where the phenomena cannot play out due to drought. With that said, as the event corresponds with the wet annual cyclone season in Fiji, I have been told⁵ that most years it does.⁶ The phenomenon is exclusive to Mabula of all the five villages of Cicia. Similar as elsewhere in Fiji, the local distribution of edible aquatic animals is often unevenly spread around islands with variations of river streams or other varying ecological features along coastlines (Sahlins 1962:26). These inequalities have not produced social disconnections where people are separated by disparities of material wealth possessions. On the contrary, as Sahlins demonstrated, unequal supplies of food resources have regularly been connected to social interactions of people across different villages (Sahlins 1962:56).

Typically, the *duna taga* lasts three full nights. It is said, however, that if a woman hides her pregnancy and still participates, the eels disperse after the first night. She must either disclose her pregnancy or abstain from participating. Similar beliefs are commonly found across Fiji, where the involvement of pregnant women, particularly during fishing events that incorporate the whole village, is said to effectively lead to less catch for all participants (Veitayaki and Vesi 2005:83-84). In Mabula, the same belief goes for the husband if he too is knowledgeable about his wife's pregnancy. The catch is spoiled if he participates even when his wife stays at home, as long as close relatives have yet to be informed regarding their expected child. Other than that, all villagers of Mabula of all genders and age groups are encouraged to partake. The women stand further up the river with handheld fishing nets while the men stand further down equipped with knives that they use to slash escaping eels that have maneuvered passed the nets. Everyone carries torches to light up the dark waters by the coast and river. Children run

⁵ Due to the interruption of fieldwork, I was unable to participate as the event did not take place until shortly after I had left the island. The following accounts are therefore collected through statements from interlocutors of mine in the leadup to the event.

⁶ However, 2020 was the first in three years that the *duna taga* occurred.

scattered around the adults vigorously trying (but for the most part failing) to catch eels themselves, which people say is both a great annoyance for some, and a humorous amusement to others.

During the three nights, people of Mabula catch a large quantum of freshwater eels. Some of the larger eels ranges in sizes up to three and four feet in length. When the first wave of eels appears, it is usually attended by one eel that stands out from the rest because of its greater size. The people refer to it as the *Uluna*, which directly translates to the ‘head’ in the similar context as *uluni vuvale* refers to the eldest man being the ‘head of the household’. In other words, the *Uluna* is said to be the head leader of the pack of *duna*. The first night’s catch is reserved for the household that catches them. The *Uluna* can be caught and kept by anyone or given to others. If one is presented the *Uluna* by someone, it is deemed a nice gesture. Although villagers find the *duna* to be of great taste because of its rich and high-fat content, it is not ranking too high on the hierarchy of foods in the village in comparison to turtle, pig or the *tuka*; a type of Mullidae goatfish that is restrictively reserved to be consumed by people affiliated with the chiefly *mataqali* of Mabula.⁷ Therefore, the distribution of larger *duna* does not follow any pattern that necessarily has to do with social rank.

While for the first night eels are supposed to be collected primarily for the households’ own consumption, during the two successive nights, eels are caught solely to be presented to relatives in neighboring villages around Cicia, in an exchange called *vakavura*. By oral accounts of history, the eels are said to have been a gift presented to ancestral settlers of Cicia, that initially was brought with those who settled in the northeastern village of Lomaji. However, having refused to share the gift with relatives outside their own village, the eels were allegedly taken and given to Mabula where they would continue to represent the bond of parted settlers on the island by means of sharing through the *vakavura*. While I do not possess all details of the story to present here, its performed significance of catching and exchanging eels is said to be a demonstration of shared commitments of ancestral history.

As eels are presented later to relatives in the neighboring villages, they are met by items of exchange that the receiving party have prepared, known as a *vakayaga* that means to “make it worthwhile.” Such items are normally a variation of things that one believes their Mabulan

⁷ The *tuka* is not a chiefly totem but a right of privilege. While consumed by men and women, the fish is reserved to be caught by fisherwomen from the chiefly *mataqali* by an act called *rika tuka*. *Rika* translates to “jump” and is illustrative to how the *tuka* is caught by fisherwomen in the shallow lagoon waters, who splashes the waters to lure the fish into their fishing nets. People of other *mataqali* units are to avoid from touching the fish.

relatives will appreciate. Although there is no set requirement as to what the *vakayaga* must include, it is often items that are imported to the island from the capital of Suva, such as soaps, canned foods, and other groceries that one can only obtain by cash – as opposed to the produce harvested from one’s own subsistence garden or *qoliqoli* fishing grounds. Because shipping is infrequent, and money is relatively scarce⁸, people prepare these counter-gifts well in advance, awaiting the *vakavura* presentation by their close relatives.

An oversimplified mistake would be to assert that the *vakavura* is one that does not involve the characteristics of delayed reciprocity, being a trade where one set of items (being the eels) are exchanged for another that is indirectly pre-purchased with the use of money. Although it is true that both parts exchange some items on the spot, that is not to say that there is a transactional relation that is finalized between them, nor that the things being exchanged have been negotiated beforehand. On the contrary, it is typical by the social character of kinship-based exchanges that equivalency is not explicitly sought, but rather, as Sahlins pointed out, that the “strength” of each side is demonstrated by the generosity of presentations (Sahlins 1962:199). While people admit they probably will receive some items from relatives in exchange for eels, they do underline that they are not expecting anything. This could of course simply be a way for someone to under-communicate the expectancy of a return, and that in reality he or she would have been dissatisfied had they received nothing, while their neighbors received plenty. The point being, because one has not stated specific expectations as to what one should receive in return, what one is presented by the *vakayaga* is not regarded as some equal form of repayment that cancels further social obligations, but rather a new set of gift exchanges that instead prolongs those historical commitments of ancestral relationships.

While the *vakavura* and *vakayaga* are deemed important for maintaining not just intervillage relations of kinship but the ancestral history itself, some elders have started to voice their concerns regarding the contemporary protocol of distributing eels. By customary practice, it is said that eels are first to be collectively shared with *all* households of Mabula, regardless of whether they attended the *duna taga* or not. Now it is claimed that some people disregard this procedure and begin to share with people outside the village before their closest neighbors have yet to eat *duna*. For instance, an elderly Mabulan woman being suspicious of ‘outside influence’ feared that ideas of individual desires have started to supersede those of ‘tradition’, as foreign conceptions of sharing began to take root within communities of Cicia. As chapter four will

⁸ This should not be equated to an understanding that the communities and people regard themselves as poor. As chapter four will show, people of Cicia take great pride in the notion of relying less on cash income.

return to, imaginaries connected to the parting of customary practices is represented by experiences of larger processes (like modernity and capitalism) where people have similarly been perceived as being pulled towards a defying mode of sociality.

Despite supposed alterations to customary protocols, the *vakavura* and *vakayaga* still demonstrates the intervillage sociality of Cicia by having eels distributed on historic and contemporary grounds of reciprocal kinship relationships. After the exchanges are done and all eels have been eaten, people in neighboring villages look towards the next year when they again will in weeks or a month in advance begin to stock up and prepare items for a new presentation of gift exchanges. While it is true that relations are given by prescriptive bonds of kinship – manifested by the exchange of eels – they are engaged and maintained through the intensities of repetitive practices. In this manner, the historicity of social relations between relatives of other villages are upheld through the annual practice of catching, distributing, and receiving eels, in similar ways as neighboring relations are maintained by the continuous small giftings of things such as basins of lobster and parrotfish, or other village staples too, such as pineapples, yams, taro and papaya.

SUBDUED TRANSMISSION

In returning to the first example, the incident of seafood transmission from Luisa to Vilisi, I want to bring attention to the seemingly muted feature of its presentation. The transmission was not an exchange where the gift of seafood was transferred to the receiver in a way that would display the giver in a revealing fashion for others to witness. On the contrary, the subtleness of the act, by giving it to a passerby so that the giver avoids direct interaction, is a central aspect of social interactivity among villagers. There is reason to believe that the particularity of my role as a visiting researcher, who resided in a different house to the household of my host family, provided others a unique way to utilize my patterned mobility in more discrete manners to deliver gifts. That being said, it is not uncommon to have other people of your household accept gifts on your behalf if you are not present yourself. Also, children walking to or returning from school are often requested by adults to carry messages, and occasionally gift items, to houses they will pass along their way. Hence, it is not unthinkable to contemplate that my walking movement fitted within a habitual system of interactions where certain parts of everyday communication is conveyed indirectly among people and households.

The discretion is practical in the sense that one can use moving individuals within the village to carry both items and messages to others. Furthermore, although not necessarily from an explicit motivational reasoning, the use of a third person to carry the gifts ultimately reinforced what Mauss described as the moral “obligation to receive” (Mauss 1995[1924]:29-30). As the gift circulation begins once the middleman accepts it on behalf of the receiver, to decline and reverse the exchange would send signals that effectively would put their entire social relation into question. Such an act of refusal during the attendance of a third part (me in this instance) would have been hard to imagine. While acts of giving are ways in which social relations are produced and maintained, they also embed properties of the “potential reversibility between kinds of actions and categories of relationships” (Sahlins 1985:27). The reciprocal property of a gift does not simply lay in the act of giving or sharing, but also in the social obligation to accept to uphold the appreciation of the social relations themselves. Refusal of gifts can in certain instances be socially acceptable, but it typically requires an explicit justification either by stating compelling reasons as to why you must decline or by praising the donor for being too generous. Whereas Mabulan people must often probe themselves out of situations where they have been offered food from neighbors, the power of subdued transitions rests exactly on that they cannot be as easily rejected – at least by social norms – since they have already been accepted by somebody else.

At a different time towards the end of my stay in Mabula, I too experienced the appreciative forcefulness entangled in the social obligation to accept such a muted gift. On the day before my departure, having made my way to Vilisi and Noa to eat what would be my last lunch, I found both seated outside accompanied by other relatives – all of whom had already finished eating and were occupied weaving pandanus mats in the shade for an upcoming wedding in Suva.⁹ At first, I was a bit puzzled, wondering to myself whether my arrival had been impolitely belated. Vilisi and Noa, however, eagerly called me over to sit down on the outstretched blue tarpaulin where I could see a bowl of curry placed down next to a plate of boiled *uvi* (yam) partly covered by a checkered kitchen towel. “It is from your neighbor, Jojiva. He brought this just for you. It is turtle (*vonu*) curry. *Vonu!*”, Vilisi informed me with a big smile stretching across her face. “*Kana* (eat), Akoni¹⁰!”, Noa added while signaling me to sit down next to him.

⁹ While pandanus mats are used to cover the seating floors of Fijian houses, they are also customarily weaved to be used as ceremonial décor.

¹⁰ The Fijianized name I was given and referred to, replacing the more challenging pronunciation of “Håkon”.

Jojiva himself was not present. In fact, I had not really interacted much with Jojiva at all for most of my fieldwork until the very last week as he would stop by our house at night to discuss the unraveling coronavirus news while I finished up my evening tea. He was curious as to what I as a researcher thought were the causing reasons for the pandemic. Being a devoted Methodist Christian, Jojiva would also stipulate his own perceptions by raising concerns of what he saw as diminishing religious faith around the world. Although we failed to find consensus on underlying reasons as to why the world faced a pandemic, we shared some good chats as the fizzling radio that we listened to focused predominantly on the unwinding uncertainties people had begun to experience.

Due to concerns over habitat loss, illegal harvesting of sea turtle eggs and nesting females, in addition to the feared implications by climate change, sea turtles in Fiji have been subjected to protection under national law since 2014 (see Prakash et al. 2020; Piovano and Batibasaga 2020). Until 2018, some exemptions were permitted by Fijian authorities who acknowledged the customary role of sea turtles in iTaukei ceremonies. However, the ratification of international conventions of sea conservation has led to a total ban on catching turtles (Piovano and Batibasaga 2020:153). Well aware of the vulnerable state of turtle populations in Fiji and the formal illegality of the practice of catching and eating them, I would certainly be lying if I were to claim that the meal left me no hinted feeling of ambivalence.¹¹ Yet, this tentative feeling in and of itself is telling of the obligation that such an appreciative gift possesses.

As elsewhere in Fiji, the privilege of eating turtle is said to have been a chiefly entitlement in the past (Sahlins 1962:346). In historic tales and legends, such entitlements are also said to have been distributed by higher chiefs, granting others permission to catch and eat turtle in exchange for certain acts of political loyalty (Hocart 1929:211). Fache et al. (2019) documented on Cicia that the villagers of Naceva (east of Mabula) share a cosmological linkage to sea turtles. According to the report, it is believed that the chief of Naceva in a distant past met with a demigod who in exchange for being granted permission to stay in the village, trained the priestly *bete* to learn how they could catch *vonu* (Fache et al. 2019:5). I am uncertain whether any similar social significance of cosmological magnitude is attached to sea turtles for Mabulan people. Nonetheless, having heard from multiple villagers how highly regarded turtle is to the rural cuisine and the historical privilege of eating turtle, there still would not have been a socially acceptable way for me to decline without having offended other people present – or

¹¹ Not to say that I was not curious myself to taste turtle, as interlocutors described the tastefulness of what people deemed a great delicacy in the village.

Jojiva had he found out later himself. As acts of sharing food are central to recognize a person's social relations, people of Mabula confessed to me that they frowned upon visiting people (foreign missionaries were often referred to) who rejected local food or were determined to eat by themselves. The subtle farewell gesture of being presented with turtle curry was followed by discreet gazes from others present, looking up in short intermissive breaks from their pandanus weaving, eager to see whether I would find the *vonu* tasty.

The muted characteristics found in both the turtle and lobster presentations show that gift exchanges are not necessarily expressed through excessive ceremonial protocols, but also through the more subtle movements and interactions of people and items within the village. In an examination on the importance of everyday life in anthropological analysis, Bloch (1977) critiqued the tendency within the discipline to exaggerate the exceptional and exotic dimensions of social practice. His critique is based on the argument that it is not only through systems of the extraordinary and ritualistic means that people employ to communicate about their society and the social structures within (Bloch 1977:285-286). If we consider Turner (1974) for instance, who advocated for the application of the temporal structure of social dramas to illuminate the social reality of society, we find an overt consideration of ritualistic communication which consequently reduces everyday practice to be of secondary importance. It does so in explicit manner as Turner saw the repetitive "customs and habits of daily intercourse" to be the cover that veiled what he believed were the more fundamental and underlying structures of society (Turner 1974:34-35).

I do not claim that the methodology of social dramas or studies of extraordinary eventful circumstances are not of ethnographical value. They certainly are, as Turner explains himself, as social dramas and events provide comprehensions to how relations can be temporally organized in time rather than space through the "sequences of social events" (Turner 1974:35). Yet, its deficiency is that it presumes the sense of loud, ritualistic spectacles to be the communicative procedure to how society fundamentally orders itself. Consequently, the reduction of more mundane contexts of social life and habitus fosters neglect of its central characteristics where discretion and subtleness are valued. It would be impudent to suggest, for instance, that the subtleness of muted exchanges is of secondary importance to social life, solely on the basis that these acts are under-communicated in comparison to other happenings and thus absent in the descriptions of more openly displayed rituals. Thus, as Bloch argued, central elements of social complexity are lost by asserting the ritualized expressions to be the way in

which it is communicated, leaving individuals and groups with “no language to talk about their society and so change it, since they can only talk within it” (Bloch 1977:281).

By considering the polity etiquette of Fijian villages, Sahlins explained how it is the subtle acts of whispers that are some of the most prominent means to voice social and political discontent (Sahlins 1962:259). Today, particular in the context of increasingly sensitive political matters by national fishing bans, contentious gift presentations are further required to be distributed by more covert means of communication. Fishing offenses have yet to be strictly penalized on Cicia. Yet, as will be further discussed in chapter three, recent changes have generated anticipations of stricter control as the Ministry of Fisheries opened a monitoring fisheries station on the island in early 2019. Since opening, the station has reluctantly avoided to punish fishers by means of fines and by confiscating fishing equipment. Notwithstanding, it is believed that enforcement will be strengthened in the near future as “people get used to the new rules”, as one of my interlocutors stated. Consequently, if distribution of certain types of socially significant seafood is to endure, like turtle, it will likely have to continue by similar subtle acts of distribution to evade the increasing presence of the governmental gaze. Thus, social dramas are not always communicated loudly but rather sometimes expressed by the more silent habitual ways of everyday practices.

PERFORMATIVE REINFORCEMENT OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

When prioritizing the extraordinary as the expression of social orders, one becomes more attentive to the prescriptive structures of society, rather than its performative structures (Sahlins 1985:26-31). Through such analytical favoritism, fluctuated intensities of the rhythms of exchange and presentation are overshadowed by the assertion that social life is *really* exhibited only when it projects a pre-established order where “happenings are valued for their similarity to the system as constituted” (Sahlins 1985:xii). While Vilisi and Luisa were related to each other through a prescribed structural system of kinship affiliations, one should also consider the necessity of maintaining the closeness of their appreciated social relation by the continuous periodic giving of minor gifts. Hence, the transmission of seafood was not simply an act of sharing, but a method by implicit and repetitive effort to performatively uphold the social web of relations. To use Graeber’s phrasing, from his reading on Laura Bohannan’s (1964) work on the extensive practices of Tiv women who would walk far in delivering minor and seemingly insignificant items to each other; exchanges of seafood is similarly an “endless circle of gifts”

and a way for people to “continually creating their society” (Graeber 2012:104-105). From the Fijian perspective “people are kin who behave like kin to one another” and thus the moral sociality embedded in exchanges further constitute and sustain relations of kinship (Hulkenberg 2015:77). Although the social recreation of structures at times seems to be never-ending by its frequent repetition, they are not static. On the contrary, they are fragile if not maintained and thus require the continuous practices that can reinforce them further. This is not to say that social relations are founded on the material interest of gifts, but rather that material giftings are ways to mediate social relations themselves.

As Luisa and Vilisi were of the same gender, an older age-group and had shared membership to the same *mataqali*, these observations might be too obvious to notice at first, as there is little to none stratified difference between them. In other words, the equal character of their disposition to each other makes it difficult to find instances where the presumed code of conduct would not have been followed. After all, this is the foundation of reciprocal relations, that one over-communicates the abstract ideal that there is no expectancy other than general patterns of shared solidarity. On the other hand, when turning to an instance where two parts are supposedly not of equal social standing, these dynamics of reinforcing social structure through performed repetition becomes somewhat clearer.

During Susana’s three weeks of fieldwork in the village, some of her relatives would periodically show up with gifts, usually pre-cooked meals of seafood and some fruits and other crops. When a relative visits the village, it is custom that people outside the household who are the primary day-to-day caretakers intermittently present you with food they themselves have caught, harvested, and prepared. Like the relation between Vilisi and Luisa, one can quickly disregard most of such gestures as simply being that; nice gestures that follows abstract ideals of reciprocal sharing. However, as one begins to distinguish people even within the most intimate social relations by means of rank and status, the norms of reciprocity become “modified or are set aside” (Graeber 2012:111). One afternoon, Susana’s father’s younger brother Viliame had sent one of his children to drop by with a plate of fish. After Susana accepted the dish, Noa later examined the plate and voiced himself in Fijian: “Just the tail? Where is the head of the fish?” Whilst smiling, Noa further articulated his impulsive desire to walk down to the paternal uncle and scold him for only bringing Susana the tail of the fish. The others present, including Susana and Noa himself started to laugh about the depictive idea of seeing him irately striding his way to demand the head of the fish to be handed over where he argued it properly belonged.

Being the younger brother, it was expected of Viliame to present the head of the fish to Susana as a type of envoy or extension of her father (who had moved to Suva) in terms of his innate rank of seniority by birth. As a token of respect, the head of the fish (the same goes for pigs, turtles and so forth too) is typically reserved for the oldest man of the family. The head is considered the most desirable part of the fish, as nothing stands above the head of the man. Although Noa was outspoken about Viliame's failure to follow the code of conduct, the circumstances of the event were not tense at all, but rather humorous, and Noa did not end up going to demand the head of the fish. Regardless, the underlying elements of the conveyed message of hierarchy is still telling of the degree to which food distribution mediates social relations among brothers through hierarchical positions of seniority.

In contrast to reciprocal relations of neighbors, the hierarchy displayed when distribution is supposed to be conducted along lines of seniority demonstrates how gifts are not just operated by ideals of solidarity and equality, but also "by a logic of precedent" (Graeber 2012:109). As briefly mentioned in chapter one, positions of seniority in households mirror the social position of chiefs in relations to commoners, although being somewhat contained by the outer limits of one's *vuvale* and closest kinship affiliates. However, an observable dichotomy exist by how hierarchical relations are intermediated differently of chiefs and heads of households. Within Fijian households, relations are mostly realized by the exchange of food, while the exchange of the drinkable *yaqona* (kava) mediate them beyond households which symbolizes a chiefly hierarchy in that people spatially orient themselves below the men of highest status during different ceremonies where *yaqona* is consumed (Toren 1990:108-109).

Fijians often validate relationships of people, including those of hierarchy, on grounds of reciprocity, by stating that relations among themselves and chiefs preserves connections to their *vanua*; the social fact that both "holds life together and gives it meaning" (Tuwere 2002:36). This significance of *vanua* is inseparably material and spiritual as it connects the living people with ancestors through the subsistence provisions of livelihoods. That said, relations of hierarchy are also validated and signified by elements of traditions of repeated practices. As an interlocutor of mine simply stated on a separate occasion, while discussing why large yams are presented to the chief of Mabula after the harvest of the first fruits (*sevu*) in early March; "it is the way of our Mabulan ancestors." In this manner, virtues of customary acts can also be deemed so significant that it is not really about reciprocity more than the ancestors who established the expected precedent for its repetition in the future.

This is how Graeber described the emergence and reproduction of hierarchical structures, in that “a certain action, repeated, becomes customary; as a result, it comes to define the actor’s essential nature. Alternately, a person’s nature may be defined by how others have acted towards him in the past” (Graeber 2012:111-112). Thus, hierarchical relations are not of reciprocity but of precedence through the structural order of things and the disposition of people’s history. This involves what Sahlins called the “performative mode of symbolic production” which are “making relationships out of practice” (Sahlins 1985:28-29). Considering that Graeber predominantly concerned himself with hierarchy as a generic opposite to equality, I should briefly note that the composition of Lauan hierarchy is more complex. As indicated earlier, the Lau Archipelago is a somewhat special place in that it is located in-between influences of Fiji to its west and Tonga to its east. As chapter five will expand on in greater detail, the fluidity of interisland movements and history has been very influential to the social formation of the island group – including its hierarchical components. Hierarchy in Lau is not restricted to villages or islands but is integrated by historic interactions and events. The applicable part of Graeber’s theoretical framework is that hierarchy is not simply an innate prescription of relations, but also a cultural expression of social exercises. This is not necessarily just visible by ceremonial protocols. On a day-to-day basis in Mabula, such dynamics are manifested, for example, by the expected repetitive distribution of fish parts between older and younger brothers, which Noa voiced as he saw the customary protocol not being followed.

THE TOTAL SOCIALIZING ECONOMY

Like the maritime *kula* exchange of the Trobriander people of Papua New Guinea, principles found in different interactions of subsistence exchange are not exclusively related to the items being distributed (see Malinowski 1920). The abstract focus on the *kula* exchange has often concentrated on the ceremonial phenomenon of circulating shell necklaces between distant islands of the Milne Bay Province. However, since the circulation also contained the reciprocating obligations of sharing other items, foods, feasts, services and both men and women, to Mauss the phenomenon resembled more broadly a total social fact that regionally manifested and embraced the normative dimensions of social life and polity, including kinship, morality, economics, hierarchy, and cosmology (Mauss 1995 [1924]:54-68).

Had the exchange simply been about the trade of shell necklaces, it would not be hard to imagine that interisland relations there would have been radically different – if they would subsist at all. That is not to say that the necklaces were not of high social value. Yet, as argued by Graeber (2001), value does not exist in things alone in being comprised by a set of abstract categories. Rather, the value of things is defined by processes of constant creation, making the circulation of values primarily the result of performative actions (Graeber 2001:81). If *kula*-exchanges were only comprised of shell necklaces, commitments of reciprocity would dissolve as social obligations could be canceled out between parties through direct trades. By the inclusion of other social aspects, such as feasts, marriage, rituals and so forth, that are much more difficult to compare and impossible to equate, one ensured that one could never really fulfill the state of being fully reciprocated. Instead, one further strengthened social commitments by continuously circulating items, objects, and people that one does not simply measure up against one another.

On Cicia, the total social fact of Fijian sociality is similarly evident by the economic distribution of subsistence foods by performatively displaying foundational structures of morality, cosmology, and kinship relations. Therefore, the subsistence economy is not simply a domain of “economizing” that is separated from social life itself (see Polanyi 1957). Rather, it is a processual sphere instituted by the social processes of everyday life, wherein people mediate a “transpersonal distribution of the self among multiple others” in ways that continuously reproduces the participation of kinship (Sahlins 2011:13). Although this chapter has primarily concerned itself with the distribution of seafood, I should underline that it does not imply that sharing of food crops, for instance, cannot *also* be viewed as ways to perform the social totality in places like Cicia. Nor do I wish to argue that it only involves supplies of food sustenance. As I will argue in chapter four, certifying the whole island of Cicia as ‘organic’ displays how history and social practices of kinship are integral components to how people of Cicia vernacularly interpret the organic certification itself in very holistic ways, that incorporates visions beyond boundaries of Cicia alone. In doing so, I will not only discuss how notions of change is experienced, but also demonstrate how a basis of subsistence economic resources can be utilized to direct change itself. As the *vanua* does not only provide a source of nutritional subsistence to Fijian people, but also socially constitutes itself by everyday acts of kinship (like food sharing), it also becomes a social field which interacts with the different processes of history by the experiences of people themselves. Before proceeding to discuss significances of

the organic certification, I will turn to see how this village-based subsistence economy is socially connected to the broader interisland network of the Lau Archipelago.

CHAPTER THREE

IF THERE'S A BAY, THERE'S FISH

INTRODUCTION

In Mabula, the practices of distributing fish among relatives manifest a performative exercise and affirmation to the sociality of Fijian kinship. However, to what extent are such practices also rooted in the socially integrated ways of fishing and the dynamic everyday interactions between people, the environment, and history? While most day-to-day catching practices in Mabula occur in close geographic proximity to Cicia, some coral reef spearfishing is conducted by night diving at the customary fishing grounds (*qoliqoli*) of neighboring islands.¹² This way of catching fish mainly involves male participation and the use of spearguns, whereas fisherwomen conduct their coastal fishing closer to Cicia by either wading the water or walking on top of fringing coral reefs during low tide with nets or by using spears with wooden handles, called *moto*. Due to the shortened fieldwork, I was unable to proceed with my plans to join a group of fishermen on one of their interisland fishing trips. On the other hand, I was fortunate enough to find time to observe and participate with local spearfishermen on some of the closer fishing sites near Cicia. Additionally, stories about interisland fishing were shared with me during *talanoa* gatherings. By combining the two methodological approaches of local participation and provincial stories, the chapter offers a regional anthropological inquiry to the phenomenological practice of spearfishing.

The chapter explores how subsistence economic activities such as spearfishing are integral parts to a regional interdependent sociality of the Lau Archipelago. More concretely, it examines some of the historically shared ancestral relations of island neighbors – known as *tauvu* relationships – which customarily obliges mutual privileges between people, regarding the rights to use or appropriate the other part's possessions or resources without requesting permission (Sahlins 1962:418; Hocart 1913:101). I argue that the practice of spearfishing both generates and maintains a regional scale of interisland sociality by the affirmation of fishing on neighboring *qoliqoli* fishing grounds. Furthermore, this chapter considers anxieties which arise

¹² The spearfishing I am concerned with here is what is known in Fiji as *vavana*, where spearguns are operated. *Vavana* is distinguished from *cocoka*, which is the customary practice of using long handheld spears.

among local fishermen when forthcoming marine protection programs are believed to potentially weaken interisland relations by restricting the possibility to fish across the customary fishing grounds of *tauvu* partners. Initiatives by the conservation oriented Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) organization have for long been recipients of well-deserved praise in Fiji and the Pacific for being inclusive of coastal communities in decision-making processes regarding the regulatory oversight and management of delimited marine resource spaces (David 2016:240). The assistance of LMMA has yet to significantly materialize in Lau but is incorporated in the 2030 sustainability targets initiated by the Lau Seascape Strategy in building local climate change resilience (Conservation International 2018:8-11). With the anticipation of increasing effects caused by global warming, people of Lau are starting to find themselves amid an international field of interests of both governmental and non-governmental actors regarding marine ecological protection.

The aim of this chapter is not to undermine the importance of conserving the marine biodiversity of coral reefs. However, the topic covered in this chapter prudently raises a concern over unintended implications of initiatives to build local resilience could come at the expense of pre-existing regional resilience found within the sociocultural interdependency of *tauvu* relations. The concern voiced by local fishermen leads me to develop a phenomenological perspective of spearfishing, where lived experiences of people are not confined to temporal sites nor to bounded individuals. Instead, I will show how an interisland subjectivity is formed by an experiential nexus of the diverse and complex forms, scales and processes of society, history, and the environment.

THE ENVIRONMENT AND SPEARFISHING

Drifting over the shallow coral tops I trailed closely behind Beitaki to catch up with the other spearfishermen by the outer reef wall. As wind conditions had been relatively calm throughout the week, we had decided it was a good occasion to hire the local boat driver to take us out to a nearby reef (*cakau*) fifteen minutes west of Mabula. After reaching the reef, the boat driver dropped us off in calm waters inside its oval shaped lagoon. Although fishing conditions were considered good, the prevailing strength of waves and underwater currents intensified as one neared the outer reef slope bordering into the deep sea as we swam away from the serene lagoon. Having spotted a large parrotfish hanging above the reef in the strong current, Beitaki quickly directed his long speargun, took aim and shot it with ease. After pulling the spear out of the

fish's spine, Beitaki asked me to thread the fish onto a rope by directing it through the gills and out of the beak of the parrotfish. Having retied the rope around my waist, I could feel the dead parrotfish's still strong muscular twitches as I kept kicking my flippers in the waters to propel myself forward to regroup with the others.

Out by the open water, swimming alongside the outer reef wall, the fishermen dived either to spear other coral fish or to collect clams (*vasua*) using a rusty iron dagger. With the help of diving weights, Beitaki would take deep breaths and descend several meters down, close to the corals and to monitor patterns of fish behaviors while calmly soaring in the water. His five-foot long speargun would operate as a mounted extension of his outstretched right arm, following the gaze of his vision as his diving mask turned to the movements of fish in front. If confident, he would pull the trigger (mostly with successful outcomes), while he would ascend to rebreathe had he not found an ideal position and opportunity to shoot.

Apart from the obvious physical elements of the sea and the human capacities needed for diving and fishing with the frequently shifting forces of ocean currents, this method of observing fish might seem straightforward to an outsider at first, as one would also have observed an apparent tameness of fish around the corals. Yet, while fish, rays and even reef sharks move seemingly undisturbed next to the steep coral wall, also when people swim nearby, the situation becomes increasingly complicated and technical if one maneuvers with the intention to catch fish. Before reaching the open water, Beitaki proved this exact point to me during a short practice dive on the lagoon side. After handing over his loaded speargun to me, Beitaki instructed me to swim around a smaller coral structure (*lase*) to observe and try to find fish for myself to shoot. With limited practice and unknowledgeable of how to approach, I immediately dived down upon seeing a small school of reef fish appear as they turned the *lase*. However, as I approached and extended my arm to find sight, the fish dispersed and turned their pectoral fin side away, leaving me with narrow targets to aim at. Unable to recognize the difficulty of the situation, I failed to spear the fish as I pulled the trigger.

As emphasized by Zahle, the importance of succeeding in participant observation by emerging oneself in the activities of people is to articulate people's practical knowledge of those central practices (Zahle 2012:51-55). This is constituted under a similar phenomenological basis in which the repetition of life practices "might lead to particular perceptions of the body, self and environment" (Lee and Ingold 2006:69). Young men in Mabula start learning from an early age by being mentored by other kinsmen and continue to learn from older and more experienced fishers of how to fish as they age. This then does not solely involve the mass technical and

physical training of spearfishing, but also a socially distributed knowledge of, for example, how to approach fish. Thus, both the socialized and physical repetition of fishing over time is central to the experiential knowledge of marine life and coral reefs. This process generates a form of embodied knowledge, not only through the bio-mechanical movements of the person, but also through the social activities. By such activities, the embodied process similarly encompasses what Mauss described to be the viewpoint of the “total man” (Mauss 1973 [1936]:53). The knowledge of fishing is internalized by the intergenerational experiences of socioenvironmental interplay and practice. This was made strikingly clear to me, not as I succeeded at participation within this web of practical knowledge, but after failing. The failed attempt left me curious of other fundamental questions of fishing practices. Why do Mabulan fishermen opt to dive rather than fishing directly from boats? Such a question leads one to further examine the phenomenological importance of eyesight to the knowledge of spearfishing.

After I passed back the speargun, Beitaki proceeded to show me methods that he used to figure out where and when to find and shoot fish by the coral structure. Diving down to the sandy bottom, Beitaki would leave his speargun aside and push his head and body up against and underneath corals, searching for fish that would otherwise be concealed from above. If fish were found, he could simply wait to see whether it would peek back out. Furthermore, as others had showed me earlier, if fish disappear using one of the many coral tunnels found in one *lase*, experienced fishers understand where to reposition themselves to wait where they believe the fish will most likely reappear. Extensive knowledge of such tunnel systems is central to recognizing how one can outmaneuver coral fish under water. Out by the open sea, spearfishermen would also monitor the patterned behavior of different fish. For instance, by counting dissimilarities in how many times fish will peek out from a hiding spot, fishers can anticipate when fish will expose their body most vulnerably as they reappear out from the coral. Similarly, one can also watch the number of times certain fish nip corals before moving away. Such observational elements of minor details are key to succeed in spearfishing.

Knowledge of behavioral changes in relation to cycles of different kinds, such as aggregation patterns or moon and tidal phases, are also central to the selection of fishing sites, as it is elsewhere in the Pacific (see Johannes and Hviding 2000). Regarding the Marovo Lagoon of the Solomon Islands, Hviding argues that people “do not view reefs, sea... and the living things therein as an environment of neutral objects” (Hviding 2003b: 266). Through people’s practices, such as diving and spearfishing, they are themselves part of the environment. Again, the practice of spearfishing then does not solely rely upon one’s physical ability to dive and to

hold your breath long enough to endure the waiting time and patience to succeed. Environmental knowledge of spawning aggregations, migration and behavioral patterns of fish are founded and obtained through experiences across time in people's engagement with the reefs and ocean. This extensive knowledge of fish and sea further requires a comprehension of implications instigated by the human presence and the ability to turn observations into rapid actions. For Mabulan spearfishermen, being knowledgeable of the unique and different patterns of fish behaviors, which allows them to hypothesize movements of fish, is fundamental to how one approach the dissimilar situations, to avoid alarming fish to disperse.¹³ These systems of knowledge based on local observations have been maintained in coastal communities of the Pacific and underpinned the field of food production for centuries (Hviding 2003b:253, 263).



Figure 4 A Mabulan spearfisherman taking steady aim with his loaded speargun towards a creek of the coral structure.
Photo by author.

That is not to say that people can catch all types of fish. For example, on the interior side of the fringing reef of Cicia, the locally renowned *ogo* (barracuda) is said to be nearly impossible to catch. The *ogo* is characterized as being too cunning to be caught and will not be afraid to bite

¹³ This differs from other techniques such as with net fishing in Mabula. Some methods of large net fishing near shore involve people splashing the water to intentionally create disarray and precedingly trap confused fish.

with its sharp teeth if agitated. Therefore, most people of Mabula have decided to leave the *ogo* alone. In Marovo, behavioral changes during the lunar month are said to also effect the degree of difficulty to fish. During periods of bright moonlight, it is said that sharks may act more aggressively, attempting to steal the fish from spearfishermen (Johannes and Hviding 2000:27).

As for the spearfishermen of Mabula, encounters with large and more aggressive sharks are said to have become more common, not because of the periodic changes of the lunar cycle, but because of the increased frequency of unidentified commercial longline fishing vessels that use baits that attracts sharks.¹⁴ There are mythological sources which indicates that the northern islands of Lau have been subject to the protection of the old Cakaudrove dominion by the renowned shark demigod Dakuwaqa (see Reed and Hames 1967:45-46). However, people of Mabula told me they did not possess the blessing (*mana*) to safely interact with sharks as opposed to the northmost islands of Lau. Consequently, sharks are to be avoided and only small sharks are eaten if caught as bycatch when using fishing nets. In precolonial times, Cicia found itself on the fringe between the southern chiefdom of Lakeba and the northern chiefdom of Cakaudrove. Being a place of neither here nor there, Cicia was an island, by the words of Hocart, that “merely was” outside the subjugation of high chiefs (Hocart 1929:23). Later, Cicia was incorporated to the opposing dominion of Lakeba after a series of wars, which is a probable explanation to why Mabulan fishers are not said to be subjected to the same mythical protection as their northern neighbors.

The difficulty, incapacity or reluctance to fish certain species are then often incorporated into a system of practical knowledge where sea creatures participate within the same social environment as the spearfishermen do themselves. Not to be confused with the common anthropological treatments of animism, which reduce human-animal relations to merely reflect a perspectivism between humans and non-humans. Instead, as argued by Sahlins, human interactions engage within a multi-parted scale of social relationships that also incorporates a higher order of cosmology (Sahlins 2017: 31). In other words, practices and cosmological beliefs are intersected by the different social associations between people and the environment, including those influences derived from the governmental power of divinity.

In discussing the unfortunate tendency to divide accounts between the “naturalistic” and “culturalistic”, Ingold argues that by presuming that people’s perceptions rests on a dichotomic

¹⁴ People were unaware if vessels operated with licenses from the Fijian government or not and were unsure who operated them.

basis of the natural as real and the cultural as imagined, one obscures the reality of how ways of acting within the environment also influence how it is perceived (Ingold 2000:9). This is not to romanticize people as being in one with nature, but to acknowledge how perceptions are contingent upon connections – not separations – of social practices and the environment where those central practices manifest themselves. In a similar vein, the phenomenological practice of spearfishing is not simply an activity of the fisherman acting upon a marine biomass of coral reefs for food extraction. The activity of spearfishing is entangled within a wider sociocultural context of the environment and with the dynamic encompassment of knowledge practices and cosmological beliefs.

THE GIFTED FISHER

Later in the evening after returning from the fishing trip, Beitaki and I, in addition to some of the other fishermen gathered with Noa, Susana and a few others to *talanoa* whilst drinking a few rounds of kava. I had the opportunity to discuss some of my observations regarding their fishing skills and knowledge, and a young man pointed out that Beitaki was regarded as one of the most prominent and skilled fishermen of Mabula. The young man added, that Beitaki in particular, knew how to fish in weather conditions most others would eschew. While most people considered bad weather as a hindrance to fish, Beitaki used his knowledge of changing weather conditions as an epistemological tool to predict the changing localities of different fish. Being in his early thirties, Beitaki was already an experienced fisherman, but too shy to brag about his individual fishing talent when asked to elaborate on what precisely made him so capable to fish in what others regarded as poor weather conditions. Instead, he would talk extensively about his older brother (who now had moved to Suva for work) for obvious reasons as it was him who had been his practicing mentor. Beitaki's modesty regarding his own technical abilities and knowledge of prevailing winds – which enable him to forecast the changing behavioral locations of fish in accordance to shifting currents and wind patterns – left the others present to boast about his skills. To Beitaki, the importance was to emphasize the apprenticeship he underwent, while also raising concern over the urgency to revitalize what people considered to be dying intergenerational knowledge about practices of fishing in bad weather. In other words, to Beitaki, being an accomplished fisherman was not the result of his own abilities and talent, but what others (such as his brother) could teach him through their experience.

Marilyn Strathern (1992) argued for an analytical distinction between modernist imageries of the person and with what was customarily found in the Melanesian Pacific. She observed that in Euro-American worldviews, people are imagined as isolated “parts cut from a whole” and that it is through various processes of society, by creative and explicit effort, in which its fragmented parts are recombined (Strathern 1992:99). This method to conceptualize core processes of sociality stems from the prevailing notion rooted in Western epistemology of the individual as the fundamentally bounded and autonomous body in establishing relationships (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). In contrast, Strathern found among the Garia and other people of Papua New Guinea that parts were not conceptualized as ever being dislocated from the whole to be later recombined by forces of society in the first place. Instead, she argued, the person was said to be born into the relational whole as a “dividual” encompassed by a multiplicity of relations, as opposed to fragmented individuals (Strathern 1992:82).

Similarly, the total fisherman can be viewed to be more of a dividual than individual. The Mabulan fisherman is not simply made up of individualistic attributes, but of the relational bonds that constitute the skillset of his persona. This assertion is made clearer when including the relevance of local kin groups, as dividual traits are believed to also be encompassed by a person’s *mataqali* affiliation in Mabula. Members of the Lova *mataqali* are said to be the *gonedau* of Mabula, meaning they are regarded the gifted of master fishers of the village through an innate *mana* of their lineage derived from the *vanua*. Other fishers in the village who are not affiliated with Lova are referred to as *dauqoli*, being those without the *mana* possession. That is not to say that *gonedau* are necessarily better at fishing than *dauqoli*. The *mana* of *gonedau* implies commanding responsibilities during special events, such as the customary *yavirau* fish drive on the order from the Mabulan chief.¹⁵ Such a specialization of identity that is assumed by all members of a clan is what Sahlins argued “brings the village level of integration into being” (Sahlins 1962:297). The fisher is then socially constituted through his or her relational bonds and is illustrative as to why people, like Beitaki, underline interconnections that emphasize the dividual aspect of people, as opposed to the individual. Thus, social identification of relationships is integral to the ways people mark the significance of phenomenological knowledge and practice.

¹⁵ I did not observe a *yavirau* on Cicia myself, but detailed accounts from other Fijian islands are well documented elsewhere (e.g. Fink 2012; Veitayaki and Vesi 2005). The reader should be aware, however, that local variations are common.

INTERISLAND ANXIETIES

The dividuality constituted by fishing practices also extends beyond the mere categorizations by local relations of kin groups. As the night went on, a few people left and joined the *talanoa* and the topic of conversation shifted to matters which previously had been discussed at other gatherings. While we had been out fishing in broad daylight, spearfishing is often done after nightfall, as fish are then resting and thus easier targets. In particular, young fishermen night dive frequently with the aid of waterproof torch lights and occasionally conduct such fishing practices on sites further away from the reefs of Cicia. Such night dives are usually located at reefs close to islands near Vanua Balavu, approximately forty-five minutes northeast of Cicia by boat. Famously known as ‘the Bay of Islands’ among sailing tourists, the marine area of Vanua Balavu and nearby islands is quite unique in comparison to the other Lauan islands with its far-reaching coral reefs, fringing and twisting around multiple small and large islets. Apart from the scenic sight of multiple bays with scattered elevated limestone formations protruding the sea surface, the coral reef locations are renowned as excellent places for fishing according to Mabulan fishermen.

Unlike what is characteristic of fishing sites near Cicia, both young and retired fishers present would nod in agreement to the notion that fish stocks at *qoliqoli* sites near Vanua Balavu were both more abundant and larger in size. After I asked whether these regional disparities were recent changes, some people pondered over observations that local fish depletion had perhaps been caused by overfishing or even by climate change, while others expressed their concern over consequences related to discrepancies of local religious practice. Despite divergences of opinions, all the men present agreed when an older man raised the centrality of the unique seascape of Vanua Balavu to regional fish stock inequalities. “If there’s a bay, there’s fish” (*vanua e toba, vanua ni ika*), he said. To clarify, others elaborated by explaining that Cicia only have rounded reefs with shallow lagoons, while Vanua Balavu in contrast have multiple and deep bays where corals and fish are believed to thrive.

The atmosphere of the conversation changed shortly after the dialogue trajected into a discussion concerning potential future changes regarding these fishing grounds. The topic of conversation did no longer relate to potential marine ecological changes alone, but included fears that such ecological changes would bring about stricter regulations that could limit future interisland fishing practices. As I discussed in chapter one, it is out of the iTaukei people’s formal control to regulate jurisdiction regarding *qoliqoli* areas because they only hold legal

ownership rights to land tenure. Although regulative enforcement of the fisheries sector in Lau has been underprioritized for a long time by the Fijian government, the interest to protect the biodiversity of coral reefs and fish stocks have in recent years increased. This interest is most visually manifested in Cicia today with the recent opening of the fisheries station by the Ministry of Fisheries in early 2019 (Fiji Sun 2019). Before proceeding to elaborate on potential regulative initiatives, that has generated a feeling of anxiousness among the Mabulan fishermen, I will discuss a broader contextualization of what they found to be at stake beyond the general utilitarian access to greater fishing grounds.

A COSMOLOGIC SOCIALITY OF SPEARFISHING

As mentioned earlier, people of Cicia are socially interconnected by a network that extends across the sea, linking the archipelago of Lau by integrated ways of kinship, migration, trade, and history. The movement and connections among these islands have not been constrained by the environmental encompassment of the ocean. Instead, in ways similar to the people of New Georgia in the Solomon Islands, a rich interisland sociality has been nurtured by the maritime orientations of everyday life. The interisland sociality has shaped a “coherent social space in which the sea affords continuous interaction” (Hviding 2015:122). For the fishermen and the community of Mabula, practices of interisland spearfishing similarly express a multi-local sociality embedded within the regional history of social relations. The utilitarian aspect of interisland fishing is very much real, as my interlocutors stated by pointing to disparities between fish stocks on different *qoliqoli* fishing grounds. However, this aspect of interisland fishing is also embedded in a practiced reciprocity, founded by moralities of Fijian sociality which provides rights of access to relatives from different islands. Therefore, *qoliqoli* areas in Lau are not in accordance with the principles of Fijian custom restricted to the owners (*taukei*) but also extend to people outside the local kin group. In this sense, as argued by Sahlins, Fijian tenure rights have historically been much more familial in scope than they have been collectivized (Sahlins 1962:278). In other words, customary rights of land ownership follow relations which extend beyond any singular group, encompassing a multiplicity of both close and distant communities. This social fact is often explained by directing attention to the more materially manifested zones of cultivated gardens. Yet, as the territorial view of *vanua* makes the distinction of land-and-sea inseparable, *qoliqoli* fishing grounds of coral reefs are thus also integrated into the customary views of tenure rights with its embedded sociocultural values for coastal communities.

While contemporary practices of intermarriage and migration establish kinship relations across islands, the relevance of ancestral *tauvu* relations enhances historic illustrations of the interisland dynamics among socially connected people of Lau. Like relations of cross-cousins¹⁶, *tauvu* is considered a particular form of kinship following social and economic privileges and rights where partners are entitled to each other's food resources and properties without having to request permission (Sahlins 1962:419; Geddes 2000 [1945]:53). The only situations where one is said to have asked for permission first, are the extremely rare but spectacular cases of *tauvu* groups acting on their privileges in full by ostensibly "[asking] for the village", initiated by presenting a whale's tooth (*tabua*) and other gifts (Sahlins 1962:430-431). The acting *tauvu* group would then be given a timeframe to harvest as much food from gardens, hoard miscellaneous utensils and slaughter as many pigs as they cared for without any precautions besides consciously knowing that similar acts could be reciprocated later. However, the affirmative aspects of such interisland relations are typically founded by the inactive necessity to formally request permission to appropriate resources. It is strangers who are expected to explicitly ask for dispensation.

The relation of *tauvu* is said to have developed either from migration or intermarriage typically between chiefly lines in a distant past and is thus not genealogically traceable. Still, as suggested by Hocart, *tauvu* primarily seems to be a coastal institution by origin, although the term has also found its way to the interiors of larger islands in Fiji (Hocart 1913:108). Considering the geographical seascape of eastern Fiji – particularly the Lau Archipelago – it is not surprising that one finds a high concentration of *tauvu* relations where interisland mobility historically has played an utmost essential part to the sociality and political formation of the island group (see Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988). In contrast to other interisland relations of kinship, *tauvu* relates to the higher order of villages and islands (Sahlins 1962:415-417). Despite being fundamentally related through historical relations of kinship, *tauvu* is expressed as the shared connection to common ancestral gods or spirits (Toren 1990:96; Sahlins 1962:417; Hocart 1929:199, 1913:104). Across Lau, Hocart noted there are no gods belonging restrictively to individuals, but that they are shared by either villages or clans (Hocart 1929:194). Thus, as Sahlins observed, being connected by intermarriage or migration of local kin groups, *tauvu* affiliations are

¹⁶ In anthropological literature, cross-cousins are described as either the sons or daughters of one's mother's brother or father's sister which, often, are relations *not* regarded hierarchically (as opposed to parallel-cousins) and are instead characterized as "joking relations" with humorous characteristics and egalitarian emphasis that permits equal rights to seize one another's properties (Graeber 2007:16-17; Radcliffe-Brown 1940).

embraced by all clans of villages and link communities at large by congregative relations of cosmology (Sahlins 1962:297).

While Mabulan fishermen say they fish by reefs near Vanua Balavu because fish stocks are believed to be superior there, the recognition of interisland relations like *tauvu* remain implicitly important to facilitate such engagements. When asked if they could rightfully fish there, most of my interlocutors would simply answer along the lines of “yes” or “of course!” Others would elaborate by stating that they knew it was their right to fish there, and that those rights of permission were granted the minute their interisland relations had been formed. Additionally, “people come and fish here too!”, one person added. Susana later told me that, even if some individuals would personally be against the practice of having neighbors fishing on your *qoliqoli* site, others would promptly remind them of their historically shared bonds of customary commitments to share and “who we are as people.” This latter comment is telling, as it reverberates the same socially embedded morality of reciprocal sharing discussed in the previous chapter; that one shares food with neighbors, because one day one might need their assistance too. Similarly, fishing grounds have been interdependently shared for the same reason. Entrenched by a cosmological reality of morals, the statements also display a telling feature of not simply the prescriptive context of interisland relations, but also the performative dynamic of Fijian sociality. While rights are said to be granted by a set of prescribed relationships, there is a performative necessity to acknowledge those relations not just verbally but also by everyday practice. In fact, in the context of fishing on neighboring *qoliqoli* sites, it is not verbal proclamations of speech which realize relations of kinship, but by the acknowledgement that relatives are *not* required to formally ask for permission on grounds of reciprocity. In this manner, interisland relations are continuously reaffirmed by recognizing and acting upon one’s relational privilege of interdependency by practices of spearfishing.

Although people expressed that *tauvu* remain important, I was unsuccessful in mapping the *tauvu* connections of Cicia due to the unexpected interruption of the fieldwork. As a result, I am aware that my own empirical data is too patchy and insufficient to thoroughly confirm the interisland *tauvu* relations of Cicia and their exact relevancies. Nevertheless, Mabulan people do have strong attachments to Vanua Balavu and confirmed to me that this area was primarily where fishermen would conduct their interisland night fishing without needing to request for permission as they were related. Kin groups continue to be linked by recent intermarriages and it is not uncommon that relatives visit each other, despite being less frequent compared to pre-colonial times. For example, whenever the returning ferry from Suva is delayed by weather

conditions at the midway stop of Vanua Balavu, people from Mabula have relatives in the village of Lomaloma where they stay overnight if necessary.

It remains unclear to me whether people spoke exclusively of the reefs of Vanua Balavu alone as to where they fish, or if their statements referred to reefs of smaller islands nearby as well. On the other hand, I know there are two distinct reef locations near Vanua Balavu that they switch between depending on weather conditions. Hocart found that the people of Cicia historically share *tauvu* connections with the region near Vanua Balavu. Cicia is *tauvu* with the island of Kanacea, just fifteen kilometers west of Vanua Balavu, by the shared association to the snake god of Ratumaibulu known as the presider over agriculture (Hocart 1929:24). However, the direct linkage between Cicia and the people of Kanacea is a fractured one. In 1868, the paramount chief of Cakaudrove sold the island to European settlers after seizing control over the territory from Ma`afu (Spurway 2015:226). As a result, the people of Kanacea were forcefully moved off the island and relocated northeastwards to Taveuni where their descendants reside today. In addition to Kanacea, Hocart recorded that Cicia is *tauvu* related with the uninhabited island of Vatu Vara and that *tauvu* relations also spread to Cicia from nobles of Lakeba (Hocart 1929:24).

MOUNTING ANXIETIES

As people began stating broader elements of the relational interdependency of islands in Lau during our *talanoa* gathering, expressions from Mabulan fishermen were not simply material concerns over the accessibility to fishing grounds, but also worries regarding interisland relationships as a whole. The expressed anxieties rested in a complex picture of experiences. In addition to an increasing presence of regulative authorities from the Fijian nation state – epitomized by the recent establishment of the local fisheries monitor station on Cicia – people have also been attentive to stories shared by distant relatives in places like Kadavu who allegedly voiced concerns that neighboring villages had become overly protective of their marine resources and increasingly reluctant to share. Being close to the capital of Suva, Kadavu has been integrated into LMMA conservation projects since 2004 (Veitayaki et al. 2016). The LMMA initiative has worked in Fiji to be inclusive of management systems of coastal iTaukei communities, as conservation initiatives of *qoliqoli* sites are urged to be instituted by taboo declaration in accordance with customary protocols. This has provided local villages with control over both decision-making and implementation processes which differ to more

conventional top-down approaches of marine protected areas (Fache and Breckwoldt 2018:258).

It could be the case that initiatives of LMMA have come at a regional cost of interrelationships as local communities have instigated regulations to the accessibility of resources for outsiders. Primarily preoccupied with NGO conservation of *qoliqoli* sites by mediating regulations alongside property relations between the state and local village communities, LMMA has potentially neglected how relations of property customarily are not restricted to villages in isolation, but are inclusive of interrelated bonds of more geographically distant people. It remains clear by the colonially anchored, jurisdictional controversy of 2006 regarding the Qoliqoli Bill that local actors have competing claims of tenure rights against the Fijian government. But that is not to say that those entities are customarily circumscribed by distinctly clear and obvious formal boundaries. By presuming that property rights of a village exists restrictively in relation to the state, one neglects how these claims to property preexisted also within an integrated web of social obligations. As *tauvu* relationships in Lau make clear, property rights have historically been shared through ancestral accounts of kinship-based cosmologies, extending beyond the closest geographical proximity of holding iTaukei groups.

Although I do not have data to confirm to which degree this over-protection has been an actual problem to people of Kadavu, it is certainly plausible that conservation initiatives overlook the complexity in which *qoliqoli* areas are not simply restricted to local villages, but rooted in a broader template of interisland sociality. At least among my Mabulan interlocutors, this certainly was a perceived and envisioned concern, that interisland relatives would in the future potentially become increasingly protective over marine resources and neglect core features of interdependency. Furthermore, as holders of *qoliqoli* grounds could demand goodwill payments to allow fishing on their sites, some interlocutors expressed a concern if increased state regulations would potentially result in more expensive licensing fees.¹⁷ As I will discuss in more details in the next chapter, the intrusion of cash payments in customary practices in Fiji are often believed to weaken sentiments of kinship as people begin to do things ‘in the manner of money’ rather than in accordance with their *vanua* (Hulkenberg 2015). Today, while LMMA assists approximately half of the *qoliqoli* sites across Fiji, the organization had not yet been active in the Lau Archipelago during my fieldwork. However, coinciding with multifaceted and

¹⁷ The phenomenon of goodwill payments is not common in Lau. However, vendors at the municipal fish market in Suva told me the amount paid to obtain permission to fish on *qoliqoli* sites in more regulated areas could in certain instances reach a total of several thousand Fijian dollars.

accelerating implications of climate change, tensions of anxiety among people could increasingly mount as Lau has begun to find itself amid large-scale interests of environmental conservation programs. With preexisting strains of colonial legacy regarding tenure rights of *iTaukei* groups, concerns regarding future access to *qoliqoli* grounds are raised as governmental institution and LMMA, under NGO initiatives through the Lau Seascape Strategy, can potentially generate new regulative arrangements to coral reefs in the island group. As people conceive the social implications associated with the implementation of future conservation initiatives, I argue we need to understand the act of fishing as not insulated to the practice alone.

DIVIDUAL TENSIONS OF GOVERNMENTALITY

As I have shown, spearfishing practices in Lau are socially constituted through a history of interisland relationships, as well as by large-scale socioenvironmental processes. Therefore, one can argue that such subsistence activities of people incorporate more than individual experiences because they are connected to higher cultural orders of society. The totality of the processes involved on different scales, enables an inquiry of the phenomenological dimensions of sensations regarding social practices of interisland fishing. Phenomenological approaches have often assumed that the goal of inquiry is to understand how “the perceiving agent” by an “embodied presence” merges the self and the world through the representational acts of “being-in-the-world” (Ingold 2000:169). The presumption is that perceptions are made by experiences as they are lived in relation to the given environment. However, is it the case that those lived experiences are solely experienced where they are physically enacted? While the practical knowledge of spearfishing, as discussed earlier, is helpful to understand how knowledge is socially distributed by engagements of both people and the environment, one could ask if the phenomenology of fishing is limited to the waters where it is practiced. As argued by Schepers-Hughes and Lock (1987), the experiences of the human body are not restricted to an individual body-self, but to a social body which enmesh relational elements of society, culture, and politics. The expressed anxieties of Mabulan fishermen can be understood not merely as an individual concern over one’s ability to fish in the future, but as a dividual voicing of the social value of historic and cosmological morality to share among relatives across different islands by being *tauvu* linked.

Michel Foucault’s methodological approach was an intersection between the phenomenological domain and the broader field of politics and culture in which he studied integrated configurations of social subjects by the power of institutions (see Foucault 1990, 1988, 1977).

His work is especially centered around how mechanisms of regulative control are exercised by veiled procedures of institutional power which produces a governmentality among subjected people (Foucault 1986). By opposing the Western predisposition of subject's individuality, Foucault's methodology is generative to the relational idea that internally lived experiences are implicated by external forces of different and higher scales to the person. Contingent upon social structures, history is by the Foucauldian perspective the precondition for action and sentiments by establishing overreaching relations of power through the intersubjective relation of governmentality.

Building on Foucault's phenomenological perspective, I propose, in a Strathernian sense, to account for the governmental experience as dividual contentions that are intertwined by webs of social relations across a spectrum of different scales. By expanding the phenomenological view to encompass a multiplicity of relations, lived experiences of people are not restricted to temporal sites nor bounded individuals. By not treating spearfishing as a subsystem of cultural practices, a form of social totality of human experiences is unveiled as interisland relationships displays its encompassed plurality (Strathern 1992:82). Similar to how Roszko (2020) conceptualizes fishers as central protagonists who experience, mediate, and challenge dynamic implications of various political interests and tensions in-between binaries of land and sea, we can then see how the plurality of social scales are ecologically and historically linked to the subsistence domain of spearfishing.

The concerns expressed over uncertainties related to future interisland fishing are not shaped by any fisher in isolation. The Mabulan spearfisherman can rather be said to find himself situated within an increasingly tense socioenvironmental and political nexus; a phenomenological node where regional institutions of kinship cosmology (*tauvu*) on one side, stands opposed to initiatives by state and non-state institutions on the other. By following Sahlins' (2017:46) application of Hocart, in asking why the polity of cosmic divinity, that employs obligatory rules of morality, cannot also be regarded as state inflicting characters of governmentality upon a group of people, we could be speaking of tensions derived from a conflicted set of multiple governmentalities. Governmentality then, is not a phenomenon of regulative orderings exclusively connected to the authority of Western nation states, but something that is intrinsic to social formation itself, including powers of cosmological beliefs.

By rebinding the prevailing dichotomic separation of religion and polity, Sahlins argued that the cosmic divinity of "metapersons endowed with life-and-death powers over human populations" demonstrates how by its "social totality and cultural reality, something like the

state is the general condition of humankind” (Sahlins 2017:24). Thus, governmentality does not simply work as an alienating force that is “conceptualized through images of dissolution” by postmodernists who study effects of fragmentations in Western society (Strathern 1992:76-77). Governmentality is also an analytical tool that can be applied to understand how perceptions of social wholes are formed and promoted through the necessitated cultural performance of structures. In addition to state and non-state actors, the cosmic conditions of an anthropomorphic environment which participates in the same social lifeworld as people do themselves, intersubjectivities are affected by a plurality of experiences which are not simply bound to the present or the past. Among Mabulan people, the intersubjectivity also extends to envisions of the future. The social anxiousness rest on potential changes to cosmic relations of everyday life, where kinship-based obligations of subsistence economics and the ecological environment are made inextricable by performative knowledge practices, such as by the social acts of spearfishing.

THE MULTI-LOCAL ECOLOGY

Spearfishing is not only an activity where people fish in insulated ways for local subsistence, but a regional activity that forges an integrated scale of interisland sociality in the Lau Archipelago. Thus, the performative activity of spearfishing is itself an affirmative action to the same Fijian sociality discussed in chapter two, by evoking rights to neighboring *qoliqoli* fishing grounds in accordance with kinship-based privileges. Similarly, the potential dystopia of disintegrations of ancestral relationships fosters anxious sentiments among fishermen, as future marine protection programs are believed to potentially weaken multi-local practices of spearfishing. Pulsed by urgent concerns associated with anticipated ecological degradations of climate change, the emerging conservational frontier of the Lau seascape should focus on being inclusive of its people, as conditions of multifaceted uncertainties also generate unintended implications which could spur social contention. Again, as noted earlier, with the contextual consequences of global warming and its impacts on coral reefs, I do not suggest that marine conservation should not be done. On the contrary, I hope this ethnographic contribution further elucidates the significance of these subsistence resources and highlight the necessity for sufficient climate action. It urges, however, that conservation initiatives should prudently work to ensure that the building of local climate change resilience does not create a paradox, where

initiatives lead to inadvertent consequences affecting local subsistence by implicating regional forms of interdependency.

As promoted by the interdisciplinary approach of Hviding (2003a), sciences should strive to be incorporative of the lifeworlds of indigenous epistemologies and establish partnerships by dialogue that aim to find shared fundamental interests related to human understandings of the world. By emphasizing the ways in which spearfishermen of Mabula are connected to others, manifested by the multi-local subsistence practices that are embedded in cosmologies of kinship, I argue for the importance to acknowledge interisland relations in future regulative policy and scientific conservation initiatives that aim to be inclusive of local – not bounded – communities. As the next chapters will further emphasize, interisland relationships and the unequal distribution of resources across Lau have historically played an integral role to a social resilience by regional practices of interdependency. By demonstrating how creativity is linked to subsistence economic resources and customary practices, based on performative relations of the intertwined dimensions of kinship and cosmology, I continue to develop an argument for the historic interisland resilience that is found in the Lau Archipelago. To do so, we first return to examine some of the unique features and implications related to the organic certification of Cicia.

CHAPTER FOUR

ORGANIC ENGAGEMENTS OF HISTORY

INTRODUCTION

By examining intersections of subsistence practices in Mabula that stretch well beyond the villages of Cicia, we can see how a multi-local existence is integrated by a network of interisland relationships. Furthermore, having emphasized performative structures of kinship and history, dimensions of cosmological orderings and environmental conservation reveal how phenomenological experiences are influenced by multi-scaled processes of society. In these encounters, ecological resources of the Lau seascape have generated imaginaries of both social unity and fragmentations, by conceptualizing the future role of reciprocal moralities in the everyday practices of subsistence economics. While these dynamics are visible within domains like spearfishing, there is an even more prevailing method that local people use to recognize the importance of customary relations and social practices related to the village economy; the organic certification of Cicia.

In this chapter, I will discuss the official authorization of Cicia as an ‘organic island’ by the Fijian government in 2013, which required farmers to follow protocols of organic produce standards by banning the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. This authorization and its effects were frequently and proudly brought up by interlocutors in conversations throughout my fieldwork. However, as my engagements with communities of Cicia would prove to demonstrate, the practiced usage and application of the word ‘organic’ have not been restricted by local people to the agricultural practices of farm cultivation. Among people of Cicia, the term is also inclusive of customary knowledge and other activities such as construction, fishing and even ambitions regarding seafaring. This chapter examines the sociocultural significance of this organic certification which has become a dominant presence that permeates everyday life in villages of Cicia in a multitude of ways. The aim here is not to render comprehensive descriptions of the practices in which the organic concept is locally employed, but to discuss the embedded meaning of some of these organic manifestations.

I will argue how the discourse of ‘organic’ – which is predominantly associated with landfarming and commercialized economic systems – has significant implications in the

encounter with vernacular conceptions of ‘island’, in addition to local experiences, reflections, and responses to processes of modernity and capitalism. As people on Cicia do not simply view the organic certification to be limited to farmland activities, more radical envisions of social change have developed. Local ambitions to revitalize broader forms of cultural practices on Cicia opens an analytical window to understand how people can respond to historic and ongoing processes of global scales by utilizing a creative mixture of subsistence economic resources and cultural heritage. Instead of increasing the island’s economic dependency to a commercialized economy and supplement markets with organically certified products, people of Cicia are engaging ideas to contest the conditions of monetary dependency. This opposition is focused on an understanding of autonomy which also promotes the historic importance of interisland relationships.

THE ORGANIC WAY

NARRATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT

News of the certification of Cicia as an ‘organic island’ in 2013 caught massive media attention both nationally and internationally. The coverage discussed the certification as a strategy of rural development that later has been described as a system of agriculture which can “bridge the gap between the traditional and modern” (Shah, Moroca, and Bhat 2018:97). In collaboration with a local development committee on Cicia, the Fijian government announced the island, as the first of its kind in the South Pacific, to be fully authorized as organic through a partnership with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom). Under a Participatory Guarantee System¹⁸ (PGS) implemented by the Pacific Community (SPC), the multi-scaled initiative ensured that local farmers do not have to pay hefty international certification costs to meet standards of high-value export markets (Ho 2015). With fiscal support from actors like the European Union and IFAD, the declaration of Cicia as ‘fully organic’ led development agencies and media outlets to promote the initiative as an exceptional form of policy and a significant step to rural island development. By ensuring that standards of farming were regulated by local control mechanisms – having farmers themselves monitor and periodically report one another’s

¹⁸ PGSs are assurance systems which are reliant and built on networks of local trust to ensure quality standards of organic agricultural produce (see Kirchner 2015:29).

agricultural practices and yields of crops – organizational stakeholders argued the procedure would connect rural farmers to markets by increasing the economic activities of export.

The achievement was not only praised by media outlets and the participative development agencies, but also by the local people of Cicia. Because Susana had told me that Cicia had been authorized as organic, I spent a few days reading through old news reports and listening to radio files prior to our departure to Cicia. I was hoping to get a sense of what significance the certification had for the island community. After browsing various media, I was left with a peculiar feeling regarding my long-planned fieldwork. As I understood that the certification was concentrated by a commercial focus on organic agricultural production to raise revenues, I somehow feared that it would potentially overshadow my initial research focus on fishing practices, because I supposed local people would be overly preoccupied with farm activities to increase market exportation. In hindsight, this assertion would prove to be mistaken and overtly simplified in numerous ways. First and foremost, the certification certainly did not stop other activities such as fishing. Even through long-term historic engagements as subordinates to a monotonous colonial economy, the preference of diversified activities by rejecting notions of specialization in food production has persisted throughout Melanesian communities (see David 1994). Despite colonial interventions of wage labor and intensification of copra extraction, food diversification has similarly remained important to the food security in Lau (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988). There was little reason to assume that a certification of farm produce would drastically alter this conception and the valuation of diversified food production.

Secondly, during my fieldwork the certification demonstrated a contravention between the narratives of media outlets relating to the market development discourse and what people of Cicia interpreted as significant attributes of the initiative in terms of potential social benefits. It is true that the certification has effectively increased local production and exportation of (now organically certified) products like coconut oil, thus stimulating production on the island's copra mill to generate income for households. Additionally, development agencies stated that local people would see indirect benefits derive from the strategy. These benefits have mainly been attributed to subsidiary effects of market forces such as building an imagery of Cicia as an “unspoiled island” to potentially develop agritourism in the future (Ho 2015:15).¹⁹ The project has also emphasized the goal of furthering the empowerment of women, as women are active participants in the making of coconut oils, soaps, and other products. Yet, to people of

¹⁹ There is currently no formal tourist operation on the island. Development of “eco-tourism” in Lau is, however, one of the 2030 goals being assessed by the Lau Seascape Strategy (Conservation International 2018:35).

Cicia, possibilities embraced through the organic certification have not been constrained to commercial markets nor limited to the sphere of agricultural activities alone.

Early on during the fieldwork on Cicia, I was acquainted with Susana Yalikanacea. Susana is a local entrepreneur and recurrently outspoken media figure from Tarukua village who was an active participant and contributor in the implementation of the certification strategy on the island. As one of the women who have started exporting coconut oil to urban areas of Viti Levu, I met Susana again at the airport when I accompanied Epeli who awaited his returning grandfather from Suva. Susana carried a couple of cardboard boxes that contained bottles of coconut oil that were brought onto the weighing scale to be registered and later shipped to her awaiting customers in Suva. Coincidentally, I had come across a recent news article the day before, where Susana was interviewed on one of her future project ideas that would aim to invigorate knowledge and revitalize building practices of Fijian sailing canoes, known as *camakau*. Except for the occasional ferry to and from Suva, fiberglass boats with outboard engines are now the only mode of local sea transportation and the only *camakau* found on Cicia today is one placed in front of the alter inside the church of Tarukua, usually ornamented with flowers for church services.

By making use of local timber from the interior forestry, combined with knowledges of elders, Susana hoped such a project could encourage youths of Cicia – and later from other Lauan islands – to be involved in reinstating and later maintaining the superseded seafaring practices of *camakau* sailing. Having mentioned that I read the interview piece and found it of interest, Susana placed one of the parcels aside and said: “We are now declared and certified as an organic island, so now we want to expand this thinking to other parts of Cicia.” She expressed why she thought such measures were needed and pointed to the reliance on outboard engines to travel by sea. “People need [today] to ask relatives in the cities to send money so they can afford fuel for boats to fish or travel”, she continued.

Already when Susana permanently moved to Cicia with her husband in 1991, there was only one sailing canoe still operating in just one of the five villages of Cicia. “Now there are none and the knowledge has not been passed on by the elders who possess this insight of the traditional canoe building”, Susana stressed. By involving youths across Lau in her envisioned project, Susana expressed hopefully that it would in the future “make people less dependent upon money for sea travel by securing that such skills and knowledge do not disappear when the elders die.” While the project of revitalizing building practices of *camakau* sailing canoes has yet to be fully initiated (although the infrastructure to facilitate such a project has begun),

the goal to expand the organic project to incorporate customary seafaring practices raises questions of the wider potential and interpretations of the certification beyond the agricultural and commercial aspects. To further analyze the meaning of this expansion, it is helpful to deconstruct some preconceptions of what an ‘organic island’ implies by examining what such a notion categorically includes and excludes from the vernacular perspective.

YANUYANU KO CICIA

The conversation with Susana led me to a moment of realization that elucidated the significance of what the organic certification actually meant to people of Cicia. As mentioned, my assumption as an outsider had centered around understandings of ‘organic’ as a commercialized process of agriculture, rooted in an ideology of global capitalism. However, the significance seemed to be more flexible and fluid on Cicia than what I initially anticipated. Not only were agricultural food crops referred to as organic by people, but also local seafood, some house structures and even, as demonstrated above, customary knowledge and seafaring practices. The organic concept was not limited nor reserved to agricultural practices alone but included a wider range of activities and knowledges. Nonetheless, I was still puzzled. How could the ocean by its maritime practices of seafaring and fishing be considered organic? This question directed me to notice a central dynamic of the local interpretations of the organic certification. Until that point of doing fieldwork, I had mainly focused on what it meant to be certified as organic and thus neglected the subsequent half of the equation that I struggled to find an answer to. What does an island imply? By simply focusing on what organic signifies, I overlooked what the word island constitutes for people in the Fijian language.

Island in Fijian translates to *yanuyanu*. In similarity to *vanua*, the concept of *yanuyanu* is not limited to the actual landmass of the island that protrudes above sea level. Several of my interlocutors confirmed that *yanuyanu* also incorporates *cakau*, the fringing coral reef that surrounds the island and contains its interior lagoon. Thus, by including a wider area than just the landmass alone, a multitude of activities within the proximity of *Yanuyanu ko Cicia* is understood as potentially organic – including fishing and canoe sailing. This linguistic dynamic is insightful as it demonstrates complex nuances of cultural interpretations of what it means to be certified as an organic island. It is plausible, for example, that the local interpretive potential could have been more restrictive had one decided to apply the word for subsistence gardens (*teitei*) instead of island in the organic configuration, as it is more circumscribed to agricultural

activities specifically. Thus, the Fijian perception of the inseparability of sea and land was supported by organically certifying the island as a whole.

That is clearly not to say that all things and activities within the *Yanuyanu ko Cicia* are now understood to be organic, as reflected in Susana's statement urging the organic project to further expand to other areas of the island. A young man from Mabula highlighted this in a peculiar but very telling fashion on a different occasion as he lighted himself a cigarette: "You see, Cicia is now organic. But it is not actually fully organic. The men still smoke!" While Sahlins (1962:4) found that people of Moala perceived smoking tobacco to have become the "way of the land", albeit having been introduced to the Pacific by Europeans, at least to my interlocutor it remained a part which he did not perceive as being customarily organic.

In broader strokes, I found that there are two main features which locally define something as being or not being organic. Firstly, people seem to apply the organic label to things which are conceived as local or customary to the community as opposed to things that need to be imported from Suva. People would say that some of their houses were organic because they had used local timber in the construction. One woman said that not only were they planting the tropical *tavola* almond trees – they were explicitly "planting organic houses." The same woman also told me food utensils now used for some feasts in Mabula were, in her opinion, organic, as cups were made from coconut shells and plates were weaved of palm leaves, substituting the use of ceramic plates and glass cups. Similarly, people kept referring to a thick but hollowed grass found inland as their 'organic straw', which some used to drink coconuts, replacing the plastic straws from urban areas like Suva. In many ways, people referred to organic things as being non-industrialized, while organic food was often paralleled as being "proper and healthy food" (*kakana bulabula*). Although people did regard fish to be potentially organic, canned fish was not. Neither did people perceive fish from the Suva market to be organic. Fish caught in the waters near Suva were deemed "too polluted and dirty", as opposed to fish from Cicia where "the fish tastes saltier", as an interlocutor said.

Global markets have long been hesitant to label seafood as organic. This is primarily because the ocean is deemed too wild for humans to fully control and regulate, as opposed to cultivated farmland. Pollution of sea and wild fish makes ensuring market requirements difficult and thus, contrary to what many consumers believe, in accordance with the highest international market standards, seafood must be farmed to be labeled organic (Alfnes, Chen, and Rickertsen 2018). Following regulative discourses, organic seafood does not involve a reduction of industrialized production, but rather an intensification by requiring the use of fish cages and other

technological infrastructures. This has resulted in a situation where nature is perceived as a contaminator of culture, as wildlife is reckoned as a potential intruder to the regulated aquatic facilities. Paradoxically, to ensure that seafood remains uncontaminated by industrial sea pollution, organic seafood must simultaneously comply with regulatory and industrialized infringements upon the environment itself to be labeled as such. Thus, as Guthman (2003) argued, the global trend of organic produce is not necessarily a remedy or counterweight to industrialization. Yet, virtues of deindustrialization are certainly perceived as important among people on the organic island where such industrial seafood production facilities do not exist.

It is, however, not only the contamination of industries in places like Suva which make things non-organic. Secondly, the things that are perceived as organic to people of Cicia are the things that money cannot buy. The requirement of suspending monetary means to obtain organic produce was perhaps best expressed by an interlocutor who would yearn the “organic taste” when visiting Suva, explicitly because food in Suva required the expenditure of money. The reference was made to a purchase of coconuts from the municipal market in downtown Suva, which – albeit not holding an organic stamp – do not need chemical fertilizers to grow well in the tropical climate of Fiji. It was the requirement of spending money which generated the sense of longing after coconuts from Cicia, in contrast from the more cash-centered market.

Whilst discussing the significance of the organic certification, people often included the topic of money by assessing the harsher life in places like Suva where they claim that “money rules”, as opposed to “the organic Cicia” where “you don’t need money to live.” Clearly such assertions are partly abstract idealizations as monetary means have in fact become an increasingly important component to people’s everyday life in villages of Cicia. It is true, as I showed in chapter two, that the method of non-monetary subsistence exchange is a prevailing form of economic interactions among neighbors on Cicia, manifested by performative kinship relations of reciprocity and hierarchy. Yet, people depend on cash to travel, to buy certain household items and, for instance, to pay fees to send their children to the island’s boarding school. Nonetheless, the idealization itself to proliferate non-monetary costs of living is central to the many people who expresses their view on the organic certification. Similar to the people of the outlying fishing village of Miloli’i on Hawaii, non-generosity of commercial exchange is a significant feature within the vernacular discourse of Cicia that juxtapose a social marker between the inside and outside of the island, and distinguishes the colonial and capitalist immersion from customary lifestyles (Friedman 2005:279).

The dynamic of juxtaposing monetary and non-monetary ways of living was not new in Fijian communities by the organic certification of Cicia in 2013. As Hulkenberg (2015) shows, as the cash economy continued to strengthen its relevance into people's everyday lives, Fijians began to distinguish between lifestyles of living 'in the manner of the land' and 'in the manner of money'. Living 'in the manner of the land' does not solely signify living by the subsistence gardens or fishing grounds alone, but also in accordance with customary practices which fulfill obligations and spiritual virtues of Fijian kinship by being "truly part of a *vanua*" (Hulkenberg 2015:76). There are ways in which money can be used to sustain notions of kinship by transforming it into a purified gift through ceremonial practices of exchange and thus removing the "alienating taint of the market" (Hulkenberg 2015:80). Nevertheless, the impersonal and often selfish features of commodity exchange have made Fijians reluctant to fully embrace monetary means in customary practice. The organic certification is similarly often claimed by people as a way to live in accordance with the *vanua*, by breaking their reliance to the estranged marketplace of money. People refer to the organic certification not simply as a process of commodifying products, but as an 'organic lifestyle' which encompasses interdependent relations of the land and its people both materially and spiritually. As a man in his late fifties from Mabula told me, whilst discussing potential implications of supplying commercial markets and hotel resorts with organic products:

If we only think about ourselves, then we will try to earn a lot of money. After that, we are no longer thinking about the future. But I believe this organic thing is a way for us to be friendly with the land and taking care of the future. If you see to other islands, where there are a lot of economic activities going on, people even pay for their food! Here we just go and gather or ask somebody to get you food. The traditional way of living is still in people. But... if our objective is money, then money will rule tradition. That would be bad and what we value traditionally will be no value at all. That is the benefit of being organic. I think we are doing the right step.

ORGANIC REVITALIZATION

MODERN UNPREDICTABILITY

Analyzing local interpretations and social visions of the organic certification, provides insights into dimensions of progress outside the spectrum of conventional development discourses. Discourses of development which separate communities into categories of the modern and traditional, generate a two-dimensional grid of relations where local people are sealed by the framing of identities in accordance with the given social order (Pigg 1992:510). The

multidimensional aspects of social life are reduced and flattened into dualities, such as conceptive orderings of modern cities and traditional villages. By being mostly attentive to fiscal discrepancies between the two distinguished realms of society, development is primarily viewed through the ideological prism of capital growth and technological advancements that aim to make people 'modern' (Escobar 2011:162). In a similar vein, journalists and development observers described the organic certification of Cicia as a great stride in transforming the so-called traditional village economy, by increasing commercialization processes that fundamentally models capitalist markets as the predefined culmination for social progress. However, as vernacular interpretations on Cicia suggest, the organic certification seems to have challenged this narrative by promoting understandings that socially contest implications of alienation instigated by historic processes of modernity and capitalism.

When looking into the locally grounded experiences of modernization processes in Fiji, one finds that the colonial tale of capitalistic advancement is in opposition to how theories of development are conventionally perceived. While new technologies were introduced to rural communities, it was in fact the Fijian village economy which subsidized the urban development of capitalism by providing additional informal labor to plantation holders and traders with supplies, and a new market to sell imported materials and food items (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:64). In addition to the demand for rural resources and workers to develop capital markets, the cash economy also required Fijians to become increasingly dependent upon the commercial sector as consumers by supplementing their subsistence economic activities. The sea has been described as a protective barricade to the outer islands of Fiji which "restrict the penetration of capitalism", as geographical disadvantages discourage market dependency and necessitates local food production (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:110). Nevertheless, as discussed earlier in this chapter, monetary dependency has become manifested in the everyday life of people also in places like Cicia through decades of economic change. While outer islands still experience substantially less reliance on wage labor than communities closer to urban centers, a few people admitted that incomes were inadequate to level monetary expenditures. As a result, some families must rely on remittance from relatives working in urban areas.

Because of the increasing monetization of village economies, Sahlins found that activities like boat building became risky investments for people as materials needed to be purchased and workers required waged salaries (Sahlins 1962:214). Therefore, the number of boats in villages have remained limited while construction costs and expenditures of maintenance have surged and made the upkeep of boats difficult. In Mabula, the reliance on outboard engines to travel

by sea has resulted in nightmarish stories from fishermen who would tell me their experiences of engine failures far out at deep sea whilst spearfishing at night near Vanua Balavu. With only the starry night sky illuminating the dark waters, fishers navigated their way back to shore, spending several exhausting hours, swimming while towing their engine-wrecked fiberglass boat amid strong ocean currents and waves. Although one can always question the accuracy of such accounts by being inquisitive of the levels of extravagations used to validate a person's bravery, frightening scenarios of engine failures are undoubtedly real in waters where coastal emergency lines are out of range. Modernity has not just produced hardship by requiring cash for people to attain non-subsistence goods and service. In the context of seafaring – while canoe sailing certainly involves risky operations too – the modern technological processes have contributed to new conditions of unpredictability, where oceangoing people from outer islands like Cicia have become vulnerable to potentially dangerous consequences of mechanical malfunctions. Economic development with the goal to modernize seafaring has been inadequate in delivering social progress and to secure dependability on technologies. Thus, creatively operating a social leverage facilitated by the organic certification, people have begun to engage in ideas to revitalize customary practices of sea travel.

SELAVO

Projects to revitalize practices of canoe building and sailing have been a widespread trend across the Pacific in recent decades by using cultural heritage of maritime history as an instrument to envision social change (see Hviding 2015; Scott 2011; Finney 1999). In Hawaii, by voyaging ancient migration routes to places like Tahiti in 1976 and later to other Polynesian islands, the sailing canoe *Hokule'a* revoked a vast cultural ocean space by tapping into vivid memories of Polynesian prophecies, myths, and history (Finney 1999:16). *Hokule'a* did so by restoring knowledges of utilizing physical reference points such as the sun, stars, sea birds, clouds, and the horizon to navigate an ocean space without the use of Western navigational instrument, and by bringing in expertise from Micronesia, because such navigational skills had died out long-ago in Hawaii (Scott 2011:92-93). By revitalizing old navigational practices, *Hokule'a* did not only resume migration routes of Hawaiian ancestors. More fundamentally, the voyages assisted a cultural reclamation and decolonialization of the Polynesian ocean space. This was done by demonstrating the capacity of purposefully traveling between distant islands without the aid of Western navigational technologies, and thereby disproving prevailing scientific theories at the time which claimed that Pacific settlements were merely the result of

accidental drift voyages (Finney 1999:5). Similarly, in the Western Solomons, revitalizing building practices of the *tomoko*-style war-canoe signified the continuity and revival of cultural identities that galvanized political innovations of governance in the post-independence era (Hviding 2015:132-138).

The correspondence and similarity of such revitalization projects are visible by the fact that they are not externally grounded and generated by ideas imported through encounters with colonialism. Nor are they simply forces against dominating and imperial states. Such projects are rather examples of processes where colonialist visions of ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ were appropriated and reapplied into a “deep pre-existing understanding of cultural heritage” which have been turned into “a driving force in governance” through creative applications (Rio and Hviding 2011:9, 20). I must make clear, that this is not to say that such initiatives have defeated and overpowered all institutionalized forms of imperial and colonial powers. Nonetheless, it proves the potential and significance that cultural heritage can contribute to the envisioning of social change by reinstating customary practices.

In Lau, the history of seafaring has been fundamental in shaping the multi-local sociality of the archipelago. Ocean voyaging has not only been imperative to the settlement of islands, but also to the history of political and social formation of the island group. Landscape changes and resource inequalities among different islands have been some of the suggested reasons to the formation of hierarchies during the early chiefdoms of Lau. The reasoning is underpinned by the argument that spiritual leadership was required to protect people against the “supernatural punishment in the shape of hurricanes, floods and droughts” in addition to forming alliances against common enemies (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:42-43). Moreover, relations between islands in Lau have been reinforced across sea through extensive practices of marriage, exchange, and trade; providing a “social nexus between islands” that secured an interdependence between fertile and infertile islands (Sahlins 1962:365-369). As exemplified in the previous chapter, these dynamics of seafaring are still reflected in practices on a maritime level, such as by fishermen who utilize coral reefs of neighboring islands to spearfish.

More details related to the unequal access and distribution of subsistence resources between islands will be elaborated on in the next chapter. However, in the context of ocean voyaging there is one resource feature of interisland specialization which played an integral role in forming external relations of Lau. The island of Kabara in southern Lau was one of the main nodes of interisland activities in the pre-colonial period, linking Lau westwards to the central islands of Fiji and eastwards with Tonga (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:140). Through networks of

exchange, Kabara became renowned for its abundance of the favored *vesi* (*Intsia bijuga*) hardwood tree which was frequently sought by Tongans to be used in the building of their large double-hulled *kalia* canoes (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:49; Hocart 1929: 26). Social networks between Tongans and people of Lau were also made manifested by the frequent interactions of voyaging visits. Tonga and Lakeba were considered “connected lands” since “soil was deposited there by Tongans... for reasons of kinship” as they worshipped the same god (Hocart 1929:190). Yet, by the time Hocart arrived in Lakeba in the early 1910s, contact had already been severely reduced compared to the pre-colonial period in which people would tell him that “scarcely a week went by without a canoe coming in from Tonga” (Hocart 1929:30).

On Cicia, Susana Yalikanacea and others now aim to establish a new regional hub on the island to reinvigorate historic interisland practices of Lauan canoe building on a site called Selavo. The infrastructural work has already begun to take shape by constructing one out of three planned *bure* which are supposed to accommodate young male and female participants from Lau attending ‘organic workshops’ (see *figure 5*). The first *bure* is being built by experienced carpenters from villages on Cicia. Later, one young man from every village of Cicia will be brought in to begin working on the second, to learn how to build *bure* in the customarily ‘way of tradition’. Unlike many other *bure* around the island, which are now often built with the use of metal sheets, these are being built entirely out of materials that are locally found on the islands. Hardwoods like *vesi*, alongside other timbers, are central in building the framework (*sui ni vale*) of the *bure*. The comprehensive amounts of other resources used to specific labeled parts of the *bure* would be far too extensive to fully list here. To briefly mention some of its parts; the exterior walls are made with reeds from the interior bush called *gasau*, while the weaved pandanus thatching of the multilayered roof is tied with debarked *vau* (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*). Moreover, the reddish coir rope made of coconut husks, called *magimagi*, replaces nails elsewhere on the *bure* structure. As informants of Hocart argued, *magimagi* is deemed far superior to nails as it would not rot in contrast to rusting nails (Hocart 1929:124).

The *bure* construction is ‘truly organic’ from the perspective of people of Cicia, not only in that it utilizes local resources but also that throughout its construction it incorporates customary building protocols and further reflects encompassed values of the *vanua*. A circular stone foundation, known as a *yavu*, raises the *bure* approximately two feet above ground level. *Yavu* are customarily reserved for chiefly houses that make them both in the literal and symbolic sense of hierarchy stand above commoners (Toren 1990:74). As the organic project aims to revive customarily practices, all village chiefs of Cicia allowed the inclusion of the *yavu* as an

important feature in *bure* construction to protect intergenerational knowledge and tradition by sustaining important notions of Fijian sociality.



Figure 5 Early stages of construction as carpenters were making the framework of the bure at Selavo. Photo by author.

The material representation of hierarchy displays the relational values between chiefs, commoners and the *vanua* under the organic conception. As Hulkenberg (2015) shows, finding ways to sustain relations of kinship becomes increasingly important for Fijians in situations when living in accordance with the land is getting more and more difficult. Social unity is emphasized under conditions of both equality and hierarchy in Fiji. Local structures of hierarchy are reaffirmed through encounters with modernity, as communities have experienced the pressing need to obtain cash within the capitalist economy. Unlike stratified relations of commercial markets, as mentioned in chapter two, the social hierarchy of chiefs is produced by redistribution mechanisms of resources that transfigures relations from a material to a social inequality of prestige (Sahlins 1962:146). With dynamics perceived as contributors to the social good of material equality, one can understand how hierarchy, as argued by Haynes and Hickel (2016), is often found to be used by people to reflect themselves within a social world of what they consider to be a good society. By multifaceted implications related to processes of

modernity, stratified relations can demonstrate a resistance to the “atomizing effects of liberalization” (Haynes and Hickel 2016:16). Similarly, hierarchy is important to how people of Cicia perceive values of a fair society by endorsing various practices – including those with stratified characteristics – as organic. That is not to say that people view hierarchy as a social good in and of itself, but that it is utilized within a larger system of ideology that people find valuable to their social existence (Haynes and Hickel 2016:11).

As a cultural center with *bure* constructions to accommodate workshop participants in the future, Selavo has proven to be a particularly suiting site to envision the revitalization of interisland relations of Lau through canoe building. Not only is Selavo closely located near the waterfront, it also is a site of legendary tales composed by a mixture of fragmented histories and supernatural mythologies of interisland events. Selavo, which translates to “a thousand coconuts”²⁰ in Fijian, was given its name by the arrival of the chiefly castaway daughter Asinate Lagi from Lakeba. The story begins with Asinate Lagi who had failed to follow her mother’s instructions to look after the fine mats and *masi* (decorative bark cloths) that were placed out to dry in the sun. Having fallen into deep sleep, the items were washed out to the sea during a storm and flash floods, leaving the mother furious as she found out after returning from fishing. Subsequently, to avoid repercussions, it is claimed that Asinate Lagi fled by building herself a raft using a thousand ripe coconuts to drift away. There are different versions to how the tale proceeds. The most cited version that Hocart documented focuses on Asinate Lagi’s journey as her raft drifted westwards before she allegedly was attacked by a giant bird and by tightly clutching onto the bird’s feathers, transported her all the way to the island of Toberua near Bau, where she was found by a Levukan fisherman (Hocart 1929:204-209). The fisherman would later sail across the sea in a canoe with Asinate Lagi, to return her to the high chief of Lakeba. Before arriving in Lakeba, however, they had stopped by Cicia where villagers immediately recognized her as the missing lady of Lakeba.

In a reiteration of the story that was shared with me, I was told that Asinate Lagi had first arrived onto the shores of Cicia only a few days after departing Lakeba. In this version she feared that news of her escape would soon spread to villages of Cicia, and that the villagers would return her to the high chief Lakeba, and thus declined requests to extend her stay on the island and instead continued her journey westwards on her coconut raft. Before leaving, people say she had collected a few additional coconuts from Cicia to reinforce her raft which gave the shores

²⁰ Selavo is the literal number for “one thousand” in the customary counting system in Fiji.

of Selavo its locally renowned name. Notwithstanding the differences of the legend, both versions of the story of Asinate Lagi and Selavo underpins the dependency of Cicia and Lakeba. Upon seeing Cicia, the chiefly daughter allegedly said to the fisherman from Levuka: “That is the beginning of my land”, referring to the outer point of the early Lakeban dominion (Hocart 1929:206). Being envisioned anew as a site for interisland constellations, now aiming to facilitate organic workshops with participants from across Lau, Selavo could prove itself to become a pivotal shoreline where Lauan relations are invoked to materialize a regional revival of customary practices.

BEYOND MODERNITY

The local entrepreneurial initiatives on Cicia, spearheaded by figures like Susana Yalikanacea, illustrates how similar organic manifestations in everyday village discourses conveys not simply a social discontent related to implications of modernity and the cash-centered economy. By embracing a cultural heritage of interisland relationships and utilizing forms of customary knowledge and local resources, the organic island of Cicia represents a paradigm which generates perspectives of change through cultural innovative projects and everyday subsistence practices. Similar to how Miloli’i on Hawaii was referred to a type of “paradise” operating as a sanctuary from colonial forces of US hegemony and capitalism, the social imaginaries attached to the organic island symbolize an idealized place liberated from the intrusion of monetary dependency (Friedman 2005:281).²¹

As demonstrated earlier, the ‘organic way of living’ was often synonymously referred to as a ‘traditional way of living’, coinciding also with the poster writing found by the airstrip welcoming people to “the Organic Island of Cicia.” By having no direct translation in the Fijian language, the word organic was introduced by development agencies as a relatively unelaborated concept. Nevertheless, through the word’s engagements with underlying dynamics of local communities and vernacular interpretations, the concept was in a sense “already culturally provided for” by the social distinguishment between traditional land and modern money (Sahlins 1985:30-31). The traditional connotations of the certification have not signified a reactionary return to an ancient past, but instead developed envisions for the future

²¹ As previously mentioned, there is a contextual difference between the colonial experiences of Fiji and Hawaii that deserves to be restressed. Not only were Hawaiian people oppressed by economic structures through forceful appropriation of land. Most were essentially “shamed out of existence” by the increase of Euro-American settlers (Friedman 2005:282).

by externally converting cultural history and the subsistence economy by seizing the commercially oriented organic label. As Rudiak-Gould illustrates among the Marshallese people, tradition is not simply a primordial condition derived from precolonial times, but an expression of cultural elements which has been threatened by forceful moments of history (Rudiak-Gould 2013:23). Consequently, the conceptualizations and materialization of traditional identities are contingent upon interconnections and confrontations with the social order in which it attempts to separate itself from.

Similarly, the distinctiveness between the organic island and the urban markets is not produced in separation, as there does not exist any clear line on the physical surface of Cicia between the inside and outside domains. While people socially distinguish the organic from the non-organic spheres of Cicia, both features remain coexistent within the same spatial field of the island. Cultural identities are thus not dislocated elements generated by social vacuums, but rather interjective processes in which people – through their different encounters with ideologies, objects, and practices – shape a social order in relation to the concepts they either want to adopt or reject (see Graeber 2013). The cultural process of tradition on Cicia – now expressed under the rubric of the ‘organic way of life’ – is mostly concerned with directing attention towards the future by revitalizing a diminished sense of social autonomy. By socially rejecting industrialized features from the capitalist economy in everyday practices and re-emphasizing components of a pre-existing cultural history and subsistence economics; the creative initiatives work to resolve different shortcomings inflicted by the monetary forces of modernity.

DIVERGENCE OF GLOBAL MEANINGS

There is a certain irony to the fact that the concept of an ‘organic island’ has, by vernacular interpretations and applications, been cascaded back as a critique of the very commercial system which first introduced it. Considering the positivistic appraisals by both local people and development initiators, the locally grounded engagements were at the very least surprising to the untrained eyes of an outsider such as myself. However, as anthropologists have long pointed out; “social categories of development are not simply imposed” (Escobar 2011:49). In fact, development initiatives can have profound ideologically unplanned effects which often go unnoticed (and unexamined as a result) by development organizers who primarily are preoccupied with the explicit monitoring of quantitative targets and outcomes (Pigg 1992:492). Western ideological models centered around capital growth are not simply locally appropriated

by processing an assimilation of technologies and monetary structures of capitalism. Thus, as Tsing (2005) illustrates, while collaborative actors express mutual contentment with development policies and results, people are not necessarily sharing the common goal as fundamental targets might still deviate. While media and development organizers stressed the organic certification of Cicia as a facilitator for unique opportunities to increase commercialization and sources of cash revenues, people are utilizing the initiative as a social leverage to reflect and diverge from ideas of monetary dependency. This can be interpreted as a counterhegemonic process in which local people incorporates outside symbols and categories for their own social purposes, by appropriating “logics of colonial discourses” through the creative making of an oppositional discourse which mirrors the colonial concepts themselves (Hviding 1993:820-821).

There is perhaps no paradox that people have begun to creatively apply the organic certification to other fields, considering that the industrialized components and monetary requirements to obtain chemical fertilizers and pesticides for farming are quite consistent with the disqualifying features of what people now perceive as being categorically organic. As one treats agriculture in accordance with the same required regulations, maritime practices is then similarly organic by removing its industrialized components. Therefore, one can say that fish from Cicia are ‘truly organic’, as well as the *bure* at Selavo and the ambitions to resume *camakau* sailing practices; all of it as parts of a continuum of the organic project led by its original certificate.

One could have described the divergence of interpretations as an example of the complexity of development initiatives. However, as pointed out by Friedman, notions of complexity rests fundamentally upon the perspective of the observer. From an external perspective, conceptualizations of house building or canoe sailing as organic may appear as “bewildering” practices which have become “terribly entangled in the larger world”, while the identical phenomenon can be perceived as simple and obvious from the inside (Friedman 2005:289-292). To people of Cicia, by applying the organic conception within their social lifeworld and cultural history, the seeming complexity of outcomes have appeared commonsensical in practice. Reflected in how effortlessly people seem to not only situate their everyday activities within a conceptual model of organic standards, but also by redefining the outer limits of the global framework itself, we see that; “the global is not just about how globalization operates as an alien and inexorable force, but it is also about how people... engage with the global and make themselves both global and local (Moore 2004:81).

At this late juncture of the chapter, I should disclose the fact – which readers familiar with subsistence communities of Fiji or the Pacific in general probably already realize – that while chemical fertilizers and pesticides were officially banned by the Fiji government in 2013, the practiced usage of it in subsistence activities was not widespread on Cicia prior to the organic authorization. In fact, the local Tikina Council²² of Cicia had already in the early 2000s decreed a ban on the use of chemical products in subsistence gardening as people became convinced that it had damaging effects on the land. Moreover, I was told that even before the local ruling, most people could not afford purchasing such products and thus, imported fertilizers were limited to a small fraction of the population who had the financial means to make such investments. As a result, the presence of such industrialized cultivational supplements was in subsistence gardens nearly non-existent.

During my fieldwork I was shown that agricultural enhancements could more commonly be obtained by, for instance, collecting soil inside a limestone cave near the shores of Mabula, where the *lakaba* (*Collocalia spodiopygia*) bird nests by the cave ceiling and produces a rich manure below as feces is mixed into the ground. I became struck by how much of a media spectacle that was generated by a development policy which transformed very little on the ground in terms of agricultural activities. Except from now having to file registrations of harvests under the PGS initiative, local farmers continued to do what they had been doing all along. While everything on Cicia was seemingly receptive *to* change following the organic certification, nothing fundamentally really did in practice. On the other hand, social envisions *for* change beyond the realm of agriculture have become increasingly manifested in how everyday discourses among people of Cicia stress the vital importance to uphold and revitalize customary activities. These visions are not founded by the imaginaries of development agencies that focused on commercialization and economic growth. Instead, they have been found in locally grounded ideas and hopes interconnected to a cultural heritage of not just villages of Cicia, but regional relationships across the Lau Archipelago.

THE ORGANIC PERSPECTIVE

Today, people of Cicia view the organic potential to extend beyond the understanding of sidestepping a costly bureaucratic labyrinth for rural famers to find market access to sell organic

²² A council that consists of all village chiefs of Cicia and the Roko Tui Lau who is a government representative from the Lau Provincial Office.

farm produce. The perspective of the organic island has expanded by integrating ideas to diverge from conditions of monetary dependency, displaying kinship sentiments of the subsistence economy and uplifting ambitions that incorporates a regional history of local culture. On the surface, one could have hastily been compelled to describe the organic certification of Cicia as simply yet another example of an indigenous population who became subjected to the global capitalistic market forces of neoliberal ideology. While I most definitely do not argue that commercialization driven by the history of colonialism and capitalism has not impacted island communities like Cicia, we must, as urged by Sahlins, consider how people's way of existence are not organized by our personal social and political preoccupations; but by their own performed realities of cultural logics (Sahlins 1999:406). As discussed, through a counterhegemonic process, people of Cicia have appropriated and applied the foreign organic concept on socially and historically defined conditions, by imagining potentials for change in generated encounters of inside and outside categories. By embracing and revitalizing customary practices and knowledges, and enhancing the utilization of local resources, people envision an alternative future where island communities like their own can become less contingent upon forces of the commercial market sphere. In the next and final chapter, I will show how similar dynamics have also become further highlighted across Fiji as a mixture of social resilience and subsistence economics was creatively demonstrated following the pandemic crisis which began unraveling worldwide in 2020. In light of economic grassroots pandemic responses on social media in Fiji, the next chapter will further illustrate how resilience and autonomy in Lau has not historically simply been founded on ideas of self-sufficiency, but in the subsistence entanglements of an interisland sociality.

CHAPTER FIVE

OSCILLATIONS AND THE SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY

Usually when a ferry arrives at Cicia, an eventful gathering transpires as passengers and cargo reach the shores. Crowds from across the island meet by the graveled jetty path which protrudes into the ocean where the ship is moored. Passengers disembark by walking across a short but rickety walkway to be received by awaiting relatives, followed by the unloading of cargo before people bounded for Suva board themselves. A group of men organize themselves in a line to catch and re-throw parcels lengthways while calling the names of recipients that are written on the cardboard sides. Besides travelers and crew members, the ferry primarily carries supplies, such as gasoline, materials and provisions like canned foods and other basic household commodities which are for the most part ordered to restock the few shops around the island. Many parcels are also sent directly to people from relatives in Suva, typically consisting of household supplies like sugar, flour, tea, canned fish, snacks, and toiletries. When the ferry is unloaded, sacks of coconuts and other farm crops tagged with people's names are loaded back on – not to be sold on markets in Suva but as reciprocal gestures to relatives who sent provisions. Handwoven and colorful pandanus mats made by the women in villages are also rolled and packed into the storage compartment of the ship for weddings or other ceremonial purposes in the cities. With limited cars operating intervillage transportation, combined with the vast amounts of people who desire to partake in the event – either to fulfill errands or to meet others from neighboring villages – the whole sequence can last for hours leading into dusk as parcels are being distributed.



Figure 6 Cargo being unloaded from the ship Brianna by the jetty located near Tarukua village. Photo by author.

CRISES AND THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF RESILIENCE

So far in this thesis, I have through different chapters demonstrated features of the village-based subsistence economy by examining interplays of ecological resources, cultural practices, and social relations. In doing so, a complex sociality of kinship rooted in generalized reciprocal grounds of interdependency and history is manifested in the daily activities of people from Cicia. By investigating the tactility of everyday village life, locally grounded engagements with global processes reveal the scaled dynamics of vernacular interpretations and creative actions, exemplified by the organic certification of the island. The above vignette encapsulates many of these elements as it crystalizes a kinship-based sociality of economic relations by the mobility of people and different goods. Furthermore, it captures the interacting relations of urbanity and rurality, not as separated entities but as spatial categories which continuously influences one another through the social and material movements across sea. Thus, despite colonial disruptions to the frequency of interisland travel, shorelines in Lau (as elsewhere in the Pacific) remain interconnective zones of social entanglements.²³

This final chapter aims to shed historic light on some of the overarching features of interisland sociality and subsistence economic practices in Lau that has been developed throughout the thesis. Its empirical source of origin, however, takes its basis from the economic recession experienced in Fiji following the mounting crisis instigated by the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, shifting attention momentarily away from Cicia, mainly to Viti Levu. As thousands of people in Fiji lost their sources of income – primarily due to the near complete shutdown of the tourism industry – communities across the country have been subject to severe financial uncertainties. Amid these economic anxieties, grassroot initiators soon began developing a digital platform to revitalize customary practices of exchange-based economics, known as *veisa* in Fiji. A group was created on Facebook under the name of Barter for Better Fiji (BBF) to facilitate non-monetary forms of exchange. In just a few weeks the group gained an exponential growth in its member base and consists of (at the time of writing this) nearly 200,000 people – more than one fifth of Fiji’s total population and amounting close to a majority of the country’s adults. As this chapter will highlight, subsistence resources of seafood and farm produce play integral parts in stimulating exchanges of BBF which enable people to obtain goods and services they otherwise would not afford.

²³ See Hviding (2003b) for a broader discussion on shores as transitional zones of engagements in the Pacific.

The chapter later redirects attention back to the Lau Islands to exemplify how the subsistence economy in the region similarly operated in past crises as a social buffer to oscillations in the capitalist world economy and during environmental disasters. In doing so, by drawing on the engagements from the organic island while comparing the social resilience featured digitally in BBF's group activities and historically in the interisland relationships of Lau, I argue that subsistence resources of sea and land in Fiji serve as a material foundation to profound human, social, and cultural creativity to imagine societal alternatives and reconfigurations.

CULTURAL INNOVATION IN TIMES OF GLOBAL EMERGENCY

PANDEMIC CRISIS

As the coronavirus pandemic caused a widespread crisis of financial unpredictability across the world, in addition to the serious associated health risks, questions were raised regarding the economic resilience of nation states – particularly of those in developing countries. While recorded cases of coronavirus remained low in Fiji until April of 2021 when the country began experiencing larger community outbreaks, economic impacts associated with border lockdowns severely affected the national economy and employment sectors in 2020 (see United Nations Pacific 2020). With a near total collapse of the tourism industry – Fiji's largest formal employment sector – many people lost sources of income as enforced travel restrictions prevented foreigners to visit the country's many beach resorts, coral reefs, and rain forests. Indirectly the economic downturn impacted Pacific artists, as well as local fishers, farmworkers, taxi drivers and so forth who have provided resorts with their services. The pandemic illuminated how dependent Fiji's commercialized economic sphere has been on the structural liquidity of foreign capitalistic investors and visitors. Shortcomings of the modern monetary system in Fiji became strikingly evident as people urgently began struggling to find enough cash to provide for themselves and their families with limited or without paid work.

A GRASSROOT ECONOMIC REARRANGEMENT

Contextualized by the dire circumstances affecting people's sources of livelihoods in Fiji, grassroots initiators began to innovate through digital media to find ways to relieve economic tensions. In April 2020, the online community Barter for Better Fiji (BBF) emerged on Facebook, connecting communities across the country through a shared digital space (*figure 7*). The group's aim has been to facilitate non-monetary, direct trades and exchange of goods and

services, in a space where cash payments are prohibited. In doing so, group founders and members of the community recurrently stressed the initiative as an alternative to the monetary system where economic relations could be restructured around values of ‘kindness’. In just a few days after launch, the group reached more than 300,000 combined posts and interactions of people engaging on the digital exchange platform – speaking volume of its potential.



Figure 7 Screen capture of Barter for Better Fiji (derived from Facebook: 19/05/2021), censor bar edited by author.

The procedure to engage in barter exchange is simple – but its value and significance is complex and potentially radical. Food items, fish, root crops, appliances, artworks, other resources, and services are posted where people state what they have to offer and what they are looking for in exchange. Much of the trades are food based, which facilitated direct and efficient exchanges between different communities in Fiji. In exchange for food items, wealthier people often trade more expensive objects that are no longer in use. Likewise, service workers offer their skills and labor in exchange for different goods or other services. As people openly admitted, these items and services would be difficult to obtain for many of the group members even in a commercialized environment that was not heavily impacted by the current financial downturn. In this manner, parts of the group functions in solidarity as a direct redistributing institution between different classes of the Fijian society. Squids and bundles of fish were swapped for flat screen TVs, while washing machines and microwaves could be repaired in exchange for a fine

bottle of wine. Taro corms from outskirts villages not far from urban centers could be exchanged for groceries from the cities.

As a Norwegian student of social anthropology, it is here quite irresistible not to mention the analysis of economic spheres in Darfur that was ethnographically discussed by Fredrik Barth in 1967. By describing the economic structures of conversion barriers among the Fur people, Barth (1967) argued that the total pattern of circulations needed to be accounted for to understand how economic relations are arranged, not simply by referring to criteria of direct exchangeabilities, but by morally sanctioned behaviors and transformations of social relationships. Furthermore, by pointing to processual forces of social change, Barth demonstrated how radical reevaluations are made possible in the moment of time when barriers between economic spheres dissolve and establish new potential patterns for economic circulations (Barth 1967:167). In the context of BBF, it is similarly striking to observe how spheres of subsistence and ordinarily cash-required items transcendence into one another. By using subsistence goods in a time of crisis, people managed to obtain items which otherwise would have been economically restricted by the commercialized spheres of exchange. Doing so by arranging an alternative system of economic interactions that dissolved the formalized exchange requirement of cash.

Through observations of group interactivities and discussions, I found very little evidence to believe that values of exchanges were carefully calculated by most participants involved. As some people posted overviews of the relative market prices of goods and services frequently exchanged in the group, so that people could make calculated decisions, respondents overwhelmingly replied with emphasized statements like; “this is not the purpose of this group!” On the contrary, in many cases participants shared stories of how their exchange partners surprised them by bringing more than what was already agreed upon beforehand. Barterers were not simply the swapping of pre-arranged deals as people would bring additional gifts to other barterers. This dynamic is important to highlight, as it goes against the lacking empirical evidence modern economists suggest in their depiction of barter communities in their mythical tale regarding the origin of money, as Graeber (2012) pointed out, that formed the foundation and legitimization of modern economics as we know it, by neglecting the social elements of reciprocal relationships in everyday life.

In contrast to commercial transactions in stores, the bond between participants is often not ended after the barter itself is completed. Many have returned to the digital platform where they share stories of bartering experiences by posting pictures of participants from the different

exchanges. Many of these get thousands of group interactions in single posts. Those posts usually emphasize personal or communal significances related to obtaining objects or services they otherwise could not afford with money. For instance, urban dwellers would express their appreciation as the barter community could provide items from rural villages, such as pandanus leaves for weaving, which would be too expensive to obtain from market vendors. Furthermore, numerous people shared detailed testimonials of how they encountered new people through the bartering network and asserted that the exchanges established lasting relations between actors who did not know one another beforehand. As mentioned above, the material condition of many Fijians during the pandemic crisis has necessitated them to barter for essential sustenance. Other people – despite having sustained financial means to purchase directly from stores – also expressed their gratitude for meeting new people through the digital space. Paradoxically, while lockdowns and border closures across the world largely restricted social interactions, people of Fiji began crossing paths and formed relations by rearranging parts of the economy from the bottom-up through the concept of barter exchange. The eye-catching positivity that permeates much of group interactions should not leave us romanticized and blind to how the global pandemic crisis manifests experiences of social inequality in places like Fiji. My advanced aim for this chapter, however, is to examine some of the underlying dynamics which became apparent in the group activities of BBF. Dynamics which stress the role of subsistence resources and customary practices.

INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONS OF RURALITY AND URBANITY

Facebook's algorithms which shuffle the ordering of posts in accordance with concentrations of group engagements, comments and so forth, made it difficult to establish a quantitative overview of the proportions of what exactly is traded the most. However, skimming through the group one will quickly find that subsistence crops and seafood are not just recurrently featured. They are in fact some of the most reliable items to use in exchanges on BBF – reflected in how fast those posts usually materialize a trade. Being a central driving force to stimulate the traffic of exchanges, resources of rural communities work in manners similar to how Friedman argues that the coastal Miloli'i fishing village in Hawaii acts like a "centripetal force against the centrifugal forces of the larger regional and global contexts" (Friedman 2005:290). Like the movement of differentiated goods transported by the ferry back and from Suva to Cicia, there are clear interdependent dynamics to observe where rural communities contribute significantly to sustain the economic initiative by providing subsistence produce to urban areas. In return,

groceries, school stationeries, clothing and so forth are typically provided for people in rural communities. One could hastily have underestimated the key role of rural villagers to BBF as most of its participative members who actively post in the group reside close to urban centers. There are, however, digital gatekeepers who organize trades on behalf of rural relatives – sometimes for whole communities at large – who do not have internet access themselves. Thus, one could conjecture that an estimated amount of people who have either directly or indirectly been associated with the BBF network exceed far beyond the – already enormous – number count on Facebook.

Although most exchanges have seemingly been completed without many complications, there have been some restrictions enforced in deciding what people can facilitate for exchange. For instance, alcohol and tobacco were at a later stage banned from BBF trade by the government. Furthermore, while animals like pigs and goats were recurrently used by rural people for bartering more expensive equipment (such as phones and other electronics), guidelines of Facebook have prohibited the exchange of livestock. Despite dialectical relations with local government and Facebook's technology-conglomerate, people continue to engage in barter swaps well over a year after BBF was first established. Some of the initial frequency of group activity has somewhat faded over time. While part of that is likely a result from the fact that the phenomena attracted extraordinary attention at first – including international news coverage – it is probable that some of the decline resulted from members moving to other frequently used communication platforms like WhatsApp, Viber, and Messenger, where exchanges can be directly arranged with people they have previously bartered with before. Still, many people remain frequent users of the exchange services facilitated by BBF.

AN ECONOMIC RECONSTRUCTION OF KINDNESS

Particularly during the early months of BBF's operation, some posts were initiated by members to discuss its social significance. Consensuses derived from those discussions mostly revolved around understandings of BBF as a digitalized conversion of customary *veisa* exchanges. *Veisa* is known in Fiji as trades where people from different places engage in prearranged swaps of items. The exchanges are not fixed to a formalized system of material value but rather premediated by social conceptions of strength and weakness, portrayed by the qualities or quantities of items being exchanged. As argued by Hulkenberg, people feel embarrassment if they become regarded as the weaker *veisa* exchanger as they also represent their *vanua* (Hulkenberg 2015:69). Hocart similarly interpreted *veisa* as “pairing off” where representatives

of two groups meet and try to surpass one another through trading where social reputation is at stake if one gives too little (Hocart 1929:83). Although people of BBF likely gifted additional goods to bartering partners on grounds of solidarity during an economic crisis, it is not unimaginable that notions of prestige serve somewhat of a function to some when the group has been described as virtual *veisa*. At the very least, generous acts are rewarded by being recognized in stories shared on Facebook. That is not to presume that such gestures are necessarily calculative of self-interest.

In his account of a Lauan dance ritual, Hocart describes that in its performance a man is portrayed as absurdly agitated upon discovering that a snake which he owned was killed by another man (Hocart 1929:90). A confrontation erupts between the two parties, where the owner demands equivalency for his loss, refusing to accept a pig as resolution to the conflict because of its unequal character to the snake. Towards the end of the dance, the dispute is finally settled after a brindled sea snake is accepted as repayment, which is followed by a choir of singing. Hocart offers little analysis to the significance of this ritual. However, as its sequences indicate quite explicitly, in contrast to reciprocal features of kinship-based exchange or *veisa*, calculative assessments are made during conflicts of dispute where people refuse to accept what they regard as inadequate compensations. As argued by Graeber, moments of conflict can reduce moral obligations into quantitative evaluations where one begins to calculate principals in accordance with penalties and balance (Graeber 2012:13). Similar to how people experience a social abomination of monetary intrusions in customary lifestyles on Cicia, the cash economy was perceived to have produced alienating contentions among people. As *veisa*, on the other hand, is primarily based on a social web of reciprocal relations, members of BBF value such practices as ‘more kind’ than the calculative commitments rooted in the capitalistic system of monetary transactions.

Furthermore, as the reciprocal tendencies within the community of BBF resembles much of what already is practiced on an everyday basis in rural villages, there was not much convincing needed for people to understand that making a digital barter system was a productive method to deal with the economic crisis. As some people pointed out, there has not really been a return to an ‘ancient practice’ – nor have the group established anything ‘new’ – people have continued to do “what we have always done!”²⁴ Instead, the group brought the informal economic sphere

²⁴ Resulting from observations like these, that emphasize a cultural continuity and persistency, I have refrained from labeling them as phenomena of “neo-traditionalism”. The same goes for the organic revitalization of Cicia.

out from the shadow of capitalism by revitalizing customary exchange practices in attempting to rearranging economic relations around values of reciprocity over profiteering.

HISTORY OF INTERISLAND RESILIENCE

The subsistence resources of rural villages in Fiji have been crucial in relieving economic disruptions implicated by the coronavirus pandemic. By digitalizing *veisa* through a barter exchange community on Facebook, grassroots of Fiji facilitated ways to make items and services more accessible to people who have endured severe uncertainties caused by oscillations in the capitalist economy. While the specific digital upscaling of customary *veisa* practices show levels of ingenuity, I would like to also highlight how village-based subsistence economies similarly functioned historically as social buffers during past crises in the Lau Islands, built on the interdependency of interisland relationships.

In discussing the impact of capitalistic immersions in eastern Fiji, Bayliss-Smith et al. (1988:67) demonstrated how transformations of economic relations and production generated enduring changes to island communities. As mentioned earlier, the colonial interests to intensify copra production had bearings on the local systems of agriculture and disincentivized interisland exchange. Implications of these changes were made evident particularly during the Great Depression of 1929 which triggered a crisis in the global economy. Intercoupled with cyclones and a drought in Lau between 1929 and 1931 that caused widespread damage to food crops, families in Lau were left with restricted options to sustain local production while the economic crisis also collapsed market demands for copra. Coinciding with consequences of colonial administrators who institutionalized cyclone reliefs – which replaced interisland mechanisms that previously worked to cope with environmental disasters – the regional resilience had been severely weakened (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:139).

Implicated by both the difficulties of obtaining money and ecological damages in the 1930s, people began – similar to BBF – restoring the “non-capitalist sector” by reviving subsistence economic practices in the region (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:67). Particularly in southern Lau, where islands are less fertile and more ecologically vulnerable to impacts of extreme weather events, this meant to reinstate practices of interisland trade. By practically reestablishing pre-colonial forms of exchange, different islands worked together to resolve local resource shortages among themselves.

As reflected in chapter four, regarding the ecological concentration of *vesi* trees and canoe building practices on Kabara that linked Fiji and Tonga, interisland specificity and regional diversification were fundamental to the social formation of Lau. Similarly, women from Lakeba who belonged to the local community of Levukans (who were some of the late settlers of the island having arrived from Levuka) became famous for their clay pottery, using red sand from Lakeba and black volcanic sand from Oneata (southeast of Lakeba), that were traded all over Lau (Hocart 1929:18). As depicted in the return of the chiefly daughter Asinate Lagi, Levukans became known as talented sailors in Lau and established their settlement on Lakeba by the shore when other villages were still located on the hills, making the Levukans specialized in trade and leaving most farming and fishing operations to their well-established neighbors. Furthermore, as the archipelago consists of ecologically diverse topographies, other islands also became renowned for their different contributions to the interisland economy. Moala, for instance, was referred to as “the breadbasket of Lau” because of its abundant gardens for cultivation that were readily used to provide yams for infertile islands (Sahlins 1962:25). In return, people from infertile islands specialized in craft productions, such as mat making, wood carving and canoe building, which could be traded for food supplies and thus sustained an interdependent association which furthermore facilitated a social safety net for those in dire need (Sahlins 1962:420).

As I discussed in chapter three, these sorts of interisland relations became customarily expressed in manners of kinship – such as the ancestral *tauvu* relationships – which base privileges on reciprocal justifications. For instance, Hocart explained that people of Totoya and Matuku justify their affiliation on a story where a Matuku god was caught stealing water from a god of Totoya so he could cultivate taro (Hocart 1929:224). To settle the dispute, the Totoya god permitted the god from Matuku to have the water on the condition that taro of Matuku would be available for himself to appropriate. As a result, villagers became *tauvu* and could therefore seize whatever foods and other possessions from one another without the need of asking for leave. Hviding similarly argued through his reading of Hocart’s work from the Solomons that cosmological connections of water and *Canarium* nuts between Simbo and Marovo added a significant reciprocal feature between the islands (Hviding 2014:91). Thus, as Sahlins demonstrated, systems of interisland relations in Lau were not facilitated around the exploitation of labor, but rather under a rubric of reciprocity and kinship which incorporated ethical principles and obligations of social and economic magnitudes (Sahlins 1962:369).

That is not to say that all interisland trade was motivated by the unequal distribution of resources. As Sahlins pointed out, women of Moala were socially prohibited from making a special type of floor mat – despite having both the required techniques and resources available – so relations could be upheld with relatives from Gau who specialized in mat making (Sahlins 1962:422). Furthermore, there exists additional interpretations of interisland relationships in that some were not necessarily formed originally on the basis of solidarity and sharing among kinsmen, but rather by the marking of “violent appropriation” (Hocart 1929:235). Interlocutors of mine told me stories of how Cicia conquered the southern island of Ono-i-Lau on behalf of the paramount chief of Lakeba during the early Lakeban chiefdom. The conquest is known as the Battle of Ono, which generated a special bond between Lakeba and Cicia that is still emphasized in certain ceremonies.

The story states that when the chief of Cicia returned to Lakeba to declare victory, the Lakeban chief was intrigued by his beautifully ornamented war club wrapped with *magimagi* (coconut coir rope) that was given the name *Lawanimate*. Together they agreed that people of Cicia would later present a different *lawanimate* for the chief of Lakeba, in the shape of a tall man – made entirely out of *magimagi* and dressed in the chiefly attire called *masikuvui* that consists of *masi* – to mark the end of the mourning period after the chief of Lakeba passes away. The *lawanimate* presentation last occurred after the passing of the highly celebrated Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in 2004. He held the paramount chiefly title of Lau (Tui Lau) and was the country’s first appointed prime minister following independence in 1970. As a groomed successor to the often mythically and spiritually characterized Fijian leader Ratu Sukuna (see Ratuva 2019), Ratu Mara became a prevailing figure in Fijian politics, being renowned for his pacifist approach to decolonialize the country by articulating the concept of the “Pacific Way” at a UN General Assembly meeting in 1970.²⁵ While Hocart (1929:125) claimed people of Lau did not decorate clubs with *magimagi* like communities of eastern Viti Levu, it certainly was the case in Cicia that forged symbolisms for their Lakeban alliance. In presenting the *lawanimate* to the chiefly house of Lakeba, the contribution of Cicia signifies their involvement to the social formation of the vast-stretching archipelago of Lau.

This story supports the more coded phrasing of Hocart where he described the subjected relations of Cicia and Ono-i-Lau as “a pair” which incorporated them into the old Lakeban

²⁵ See Kabutaulaka (2015:125) who discusses how the “Pacific Way” notion that Ratu Mara used when referring to Fiji’s “smooth transition from colonial rule” was also invoked to affirm a Pan-Oceania identity, in addition to stir debates regarding features of its alleged Polynesian partiality.

dominion by warfare (Hocart 1929:23). In contrast, Hocart found that the other southern islands of Lau had no recorded history of warfare, leaving people primarily stating kinship as the main reason for their affiliation to Lakeba (Hocart 1929:25). Notwithstanding, manifested in the different accounts of kinship, oceanic trading networks and warfare, the structures which Europeans met in the 1800s were not communities of “self-sufficient cells”, but rather “a complex system of political patronage, alliances and economic exchange” which had organized production around ecological diversity and centralized power through interisland exchange (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:47). The intensification of commodity exportation did generate a “new social distribution of vulnerability” in eastern Fiji, where hazards became linked by the ecological, economic, and political impacts of colonialism (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:115). Nonetheless, the diverse ecological basis of subsistence resources still facilitated a general capacity to withstand crises of various kinds in Lau by reinstating practices of interisland trade.

I am unaware if anything similar occurred in Lau resulting from the economic difficulties experienced from the coronavirus implications. Considering the high prevalence and reliance on money-intensive fiberglass engine boats today in Lau, it is difficult to envision that being the case. Shipments to islands were cancelled for several weeks due to lockdown measures by the Fijian government which resulted in emptied shelves in the village shops around Cicia, interlocutors told me via text messages. As Cicia has a great abundance of subsistence gardens to supplement their seafood diet, people raised few concerns to me besides some abstinence longing for sugar products during the lockdown and being separated from relatives in the urban cities. Most expressions regarded the gratitude for their *vanua* while witnessing people on Viti Levu struggling to make ends meet with limited cash incomes. The organic island was characterized as a source of blessing, supporting its people to endure the economic downturn implicated by the pandemic. This helps to highlight the important relation between village-based subsistence economics and the creative initiative of BBF, exemplifying resilient capacities of customary practices in combination with ecological resources.

RADICAL CREATIVITY OF SUBSISTENCE ECONOMICS

The initiative of BBF did not only propose alternatives for social change – it directly acted by imposing an alternative arrangement to a monetary economic system during the pandemic crisis. By facilitating a prohibition on cash exchange, BBF augmented the crucial role of subsistence-based resources in everyday economic activities. In doing so, by revitalizing pre-

existing sociocultural practices of *veisa* exchange, rooted in foundations of Fijian sociality and history, the digital community not only highlighted resilient features of rural communities to endure predicaments of global scales. The group also creatively proposed locally grounded visions for both the present and future where economic relations could be recentered around values of kindness and reciprocity – as opposed to capitalistic greed and profiteering.

Friedman argued that the roots of “the creative destruction of modernity” in Hawaii was not an invention of academic elites, but by grassroot, rural people where society did not need salvation as it already existed among the villagers and thus represented “an idyllic ideal type of what life could be about” (Friedman 2005:282-283). Similarly, practices that are labeled under the conception of tradition often hold a particular capacity to generate perspectives that can take radical forms to contest diverse forms of power structures (Graeber 2007:16). As exemplified in chapter four, people can seize extraneous concepts creatively – such as the commercialized concept of organic produce – through appropriative actions that re-places them into a web of vernacular conceptions and local practices. Concepts and activities are not necessarily given new meaning besides reflecting a predisposition of social dynamics, rooted within a complex cultural history which can culminate surprising outcomes and potentials for radical envisions of change. In this manner, the appearances of social structures are not fixed systems but fluctuating categories which can at different conjunctures of history empower certain people, through performative engagements with events of different scales, where culture demonstrates a synthesis of both stability and change (Sahlins 1985:144). Through active processes of cultural reproduction, perhaps a re-emergence of mounting interisland exchanges in Lau could prove inevitable as people across the archipelago are potentially later incorporated to the ‘organic envisions’ that permeates the island of Cicia today.

While the creativity displayed by the organic application can be said to be an externally oriented conversion of the subsistence economy by taking use of the global ‘organic’ concept, BBF is oriented inwards by converting subsistence economic practices locally in a time of global crisis. It should probably have come as no surprise that such a grassroots initiative can have widespread appeal in a Pacific Island Country like Fiji. As seen by both the local aspirations on Cicia and the members of the BBF community that contest conditions of monetary dependency, critiques of the cash economy have also in recent years been a Pacific trend by lifting the importance of ‘traditional wealth’. In 2005 in Vanuatu, for instance, the Vanuatu Cultural Center (VCC) engaged grassroots of people in cultural projects that allowed them to facilitate exchanges between formal and informal economic sectors (Regenvanu and Geismar 2011). The VCC did

so by establishing what they named the Traditional Money Banks Project that allowed customary and ceremonial items, such as pigs and shell money, to be used as valid substitutes for cash when paying for state-provided services – such as school and hospital fees.

Following the accomplishments of BBF, grassroot groups from other Pacific countries, such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Samoa, and even Australia also began initiating non-monetary economic solutions by establishing their own digital bartering communities. It is difficult to account for what long-term changes that can materialize from such initiatives. However, it certainly has a great transformative potential as manifested by the enormous popularity of BBF in that it breaks with modern economic assumptions and theories to how economic lives are best structured and organized. Furthermore, by being highly reliant on subsistence resources, BBF demonstrates how the creative mind of imagining things is not founded in free-floating obscure ideas detached from the social and material world. Rather, the creativity of imagination is a process – or “a material force” as Graeber called it – by “which we make and maintain reality” (Graeber 2009:523). The coronavirus pandemic did not simply highlight levels of vulnerability in Fiji, but also brought into the foreground the dimensions of social resilience, founded in everyday forms of cultural innovations and subsistence economic practices during oscillations in the global economy.

EPILOG

THE ROCK THAT WAS GIVEN

One Wednesday morning shortly after breakfast, Epeli drove up in front of our house, and invited Susana and me to join him for a scenic tour of the island. Epeli's main occupation on Cicia was to transport people and goods in his Toyota pickup truck, leaving him preoccupied for most parts of the day. That Wednesday morning, however, his work schedule was cleared as he would assist his grandfather with errands around midday, and he suggested that Susana and I could spend the rest of the time with him to explore the island. Noa also wished to join the drive and tagged along Susana and I, seating himself in the passenger seat next to Epeli. At this point I had yet to travel the eastern coast of Cicia and eagerly collected my camera and took seat inside the truck which was buzzing with remixed Fijian reggaeton music.

Shortly after having departed Mabula eastwards, along the dusty road paralleling most of the coastline of Cicia, Epeli pulled over near a large rock formation. "This is *Vatusoli*", Epeli explained while pointing his finger out from the rolled down window. Having pulled the parking brake, Epeli suggested we should get out of the truck for a closer look. The rock was relatively massive, with a rather slim foundation while being bulky and wide up top with its highest point surging approximately 20 feet above the waterfront (*figure 8 and 9*). At first, its formation struck me as the form of a mushroom. However, as interlocutors later pointed out, people of Cicia compared its shape to the handheld *iri buli* fan that are weaved by women in the village communities. "Do you know the story of Ma'afu?", Epeli asked as we walked towards the *Vatusoli*.

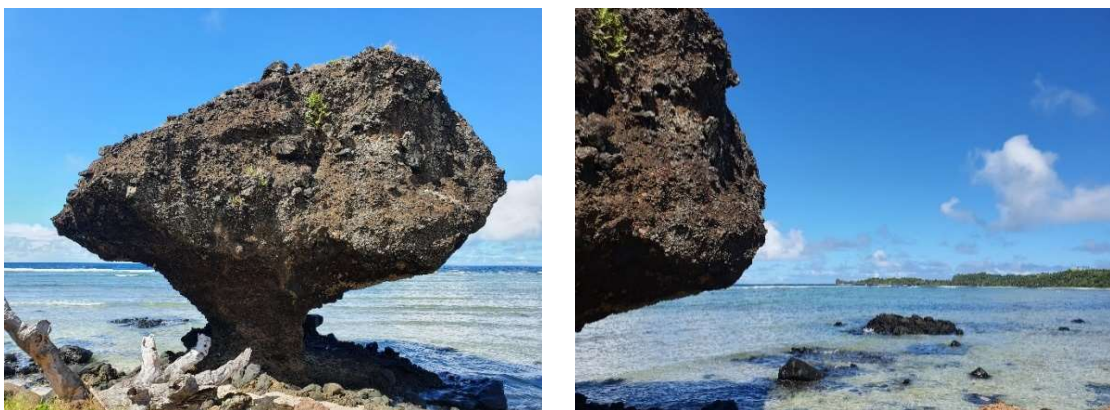


Figure 8 and 9 Vatusoli in its full grandeur to the left and overlooking the seashore of Mabula on the right. Photos by author.

At the time, I had yet to be introduced to the story of *Vatusoli* and had heard little of the historically influential figure Enele Ma`afu who ventured to the Lauan isles decades prior to the cession of Fiji's formal sovereignty in 1874 to the British Empire. Upon Ma`afu's arrival in 1848, the confederated chiefdom of Lau stretched only from Cicia in the north to Ono-i-Lau in the south (Spurway 2015:70).²⁶ However, as briefly mentioned in chapter one, through means of conquest, Ma`afu established himself as a prevailing figure in the region outside of Tonga by forming a provincial taxation system of copra that extended his political footprint to include islands as far north as Vanua Balavu (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:56).

While Ma`afu did experience shifting periods of political hardship of various sorts, he managed to align himself next to the paramount chief of Lakeba by being instated as the first ever Tui Lau in 1869 (Spurway 2015:133-134, 255). As Tui Lau, Ma`afu aspired to rule the region by challenging other prominent chiefs of Fiji while simultaneously withdrawing his political obligations to his brother Tupou I (the Tongan monarch) which resulted in Ma`afu consolidating the political center of Lakeba (Spurway 2015:133). Although Ma`afu's ambitions to rule as a sovereign over Lau was short-lived by the formal British colonialization of the country, his attempted, and for the most part successful acquisition of eastern Fiji, not only paved way for Ma`afu's later dominant position paralleled with the colonial apparatus. It also dispensed stories of his encounters with local communities throughout the region.

“Because of this rock, Ma`afu failed to conquer Cicia”, Epeli explained. Susana elaborated on the story by telling me how Ma`afu had been warned by the Lakeban chief to avoid violent confrontation specifically with the people of Cicia who were renowned for their strong history as warriors, particularly as a result of their involvement in the Battle of Ono. Ma`afu allegedly listened to the advice but still sailed to Cicia with the intent of subduing the chiefs of the island to subject them under his rule. Upon his arrival, after sailing across the Lakeba Passage with his *kalia* canoe, the chiefs of Cicia agreed through negotiations that Cicia would be the land of Ma`afu upon one condition. To demonstrate his strength over the chiefs, Ma`afu was instructed to use ropes to tie his large canoe to the *Vatusoli*. Ma`afu was promised that if his canoe and the onboard crew managed to tear down the rock with the force generated from their sails, the chiefs would succumb to his rule. Ma`afu is said to have agreed to the terms. However, his attempt to pull the *Vatusoli* into the water failed by the rock withstanding the traction of the

²⁶ The properties behind who Ma`afu was in terms of his personal background, the motivational reasoning for him to set sail westwards from Tonga, and perhaps most central to Lau, the explanations as to how his character in a multitude of ways worked to proclaim power within a preexisting political structure of the Lau chiefdom are a complex and much debated issue of Pacific history (see Spurway 2015).

ropes. Translated into English as “the rock that was given”, the story of *Vatusoli* became manifested as a physical solidification of social strength and power of the island. People sometimes refers to it in extension as “the rock that was given to Tonga” (*Na Vatusoli ki Tonga*), referring to Ma`afu as the Tongan prince and external challenger to the political leadership of Cicia, who by local accounts of history failed to conquer Cicia.

With the inability of Ma`afu to tear down the sturdy rock, *Vatusoli* since stood overlooking the southern shoreline of Cicia until it gave in due to erosion and sea waves in early October 2020; a striking manifestation to how climate change with rising sea levels affects the sociocultural environments in the Pacific. Yet, as the rock served its social purpose, its significance has already been well-established in the intergenerational accounts of local storytelling practices. I have been unsuccessful in finding literature sources that documented Ma`afu’s failure to conquer Cicia. Perhaps this was obscured by the fact that Ma`afu ended up having substantial influence over Cicia through his alignment with the Lakeban chief that continued under the colonial apparatus as holder of the Tui Lau title. Notwithstanding, as *Vatusoli* was brought up by others on later occasions too, the story conversed the expression of a multi-localized resilience. By not simply representing a long-standing autonomy of the island bounded by the sea, the significance of *Vatusoli* expands beyond shores, denoting their allyship with Lakeba that allegedly made the Lakeban chief discourage Ma`afu from seizing power by means of forceful conquest. In the Maussian sense, *Vatusoli* materially epitomized a total social fact in the social landscape by reflecting the historical interisland sociality and resilience of Cician people. Today, similar facts are being resumed on Cicia by innovative ambitions of subsistence economic activities on the organically certified island, with the aim to reinvigorate a broad cultural history of the Lau seascape.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis, I have, by examining social features of subsistence economics, illustrated how the ecology of sea and land serves as a material foundation to human capabilities, such as creativity and resilience. Throughout the chapters, I have argued for the centrality of Fijian sociality and its social significance in village-based subsistence economics, by recognizing the environment and people’s lived lives as inseparably connected. Furthermore, I have analyzed how the multifaceted and multidimensional dynamics and processes take root within multi-local realities and practices in places like Cicia. In chapter two, I began by examining the

distributive practices of seafood to discuss the performative sociality of Fijian kinship by viewing subsistence exchanges not simply as the movement of things, but as commitments and manifestations of social relationships. By displaying foundational structures of morality, cosmology, and kinship, I showed how indebtedness is not always an undesired component of sociality as reciprocal obligations features customary understandings of solidarity among neighboring households in Mabula village and around the island of Cicia.

In chapter three, I further argued how ideas of interdependency are manifested in contemporary practices of spearfishing in Lau. As illustrated by the dividuality of Mabulan people which extends beyond local relations of kin groups, fishing is incorporated into a broader sociality that is instituted by kinship-based networks of interisland cosmology and subsistence practices. Furthermore, I argued that a phenomenological understanding of spearfishing should not be constrained to the physical dimensions of engagements. By incorporating the concept of governmentality into prospects of marine tenure and environmental conservation of customary fishing grounds in Lau, I analyzed how spearfishing is inclusive of temporal perceptions of the present and future; entangled within a multi-scaled plurality of social processes and history.

As the social ecology of village-based subsistence economies can be conceptualized as a node entangled to vast and multifaceted processes of society, I returned in chapter four to investigate the opening question of the thesis; why is an island in Fiji ‘organic’? According to people of Cicia, the island had to a certain extent, always been organic. Social implications related to the organic certification of Cicia unveiled how vernacular interpretations and conditions of monetary dependency fostered a creative appropriation of the global and commercialized organic concept. As the certification proved to have meaningful associations that diverged from global capitalistic connotations through its local encounters, the organic concept turned into a holistic understanding of customary lifestyles that envisioned social change by stressing the kinship-based sentiments of subsistence economics. The envisions of revitalizing a cultural identity that socially insulated itself from capitalism also invoked the interisland sociality of Lau, by incorporating aspirations to establish the site of Selavo as a regional hub of ‘organic workshops’ for Lauan youths.

The entanglement of subsistence practices and interisland sociality was accounted for historically in chapter five, where I discussed the resilient role of subsistence resources to withstand oscillations in the global economy. However, as the Barter for Better Fiji Facebook group proved to demonstrate as a grassroots initiative to relieve economic tensions inflicted by the coronavirus pandemic in the country, the subsistence economy does not just function as a

social buffer to mitigate crises. More radically, local engagements that creatively reinstated non-monetary forms of exchange on a digital platform, exemplified an alternative way of envisioning and reconfiguring the economy from the ground up. The BBF community did so by directly combining the ecological features of subsistence economics and cultural history in their exchange practices while facing the severe economic implications from the pandemic.

As manifested by people's everyday experiences and ways of living, the village-based subsistence economy is both a historic and contemporary node of social engagements in Fiji. By using comparative literature from differentiated time periods, I integrated a methodological perspective to illustrate how creative change does not simply arise from nothing. Change is connected to performative structures of history which through social encounters across time simultaneously can reproduce cultural continuity through transformative engagements. The present transcends the past, as argued by Sahlins, while remaining true to its history, being conditioned by a particular cultural order in addition to a given practical situation or event (Sahlins 1985:152). In this manner, change and continuity or history and structure are not contradicting concepts, but contingent processes which intersect and influence each other.

By viewing change and continuity as two sides of the same coin, it becomes evident that notions of culture, as pointed out by Graeber (2013), are not social creations that form their structures in isolation. There is no culture which exists alone. Through his Maussian interpretation, Graeber proposed culture as a self-defining procedure of comparisons that are manifested by creative acts of conscious rejections; performed in manners of defiance which make people *not* diffused with others (Graeber 2013:3). Graeber predominantly concerned himself with how these acts were performed to establish social distance between groups of people. However, I would also argue that his concept of defiance is applicable, in the Hocartian sense, to how historical structures of interisland distinction and specificity generated closeness and unification across the Lau seascape through social mobility and ecological differentiation. In this integrated web of interisland relationships, we have seen how the ontology of everyday village life on the organic island of Cicia is connected to a multi-local way of existence. As manifested by the human-environmental relationships of subsistence economic practices, I have argued that these interisland relations are generated by their pluralistically contingent features of ecology, kinship, cosmology, politics, and history.

In order to demonstrate this theoretical perspective ethnographically, I found it necessary to do so in a multi-scaled fashion by analytically dividing my material on different levels of social processes through different chapters – ranging from the locally grounded engagements of food

distribution to global processes of commercialization and world-wide crises. That way of being selective of scale in accordance with the empirical material I decided to present, should not be suggestive that these localized practices are not also implicated by large scale processes. The making or unmaking of something as either local or global ultimately rests on analytical decisions and preferences made by the ethnographer. As argued by Tsing, dichotomies of the global and local typically assumes the global as “the latest stage in macronarratives”, which makes it appear as a homogenous force imposed upon local realities (Tsing 2005:58). In practice, however, as the social reality on Cicia makes strikingly evident, these scaled dynamics are not divided by a dualistic hierarchy of influence as they continuously implicate one another through different forms of everyday encounters. While there are clear social boundaries produced by people to distinguish the inside from the outside world, these imaginaries are generated, not despite, but because of the recurrent flows and movements of material and immaterial categories of society that transits in-between its different cultural domains (Friedman 2005:288). In subsistence economic practices on Cicia, the cultural interpretation and application of the organic certification culminates an epitome of these socially divergent and significant forces of multifaceted scales.

Global phenomena – like an organic certification, a worldwide pandemic, or implications of climate change – are always engaged by taking root in sociocultural particularities. As my physical fieldwork on Cicia was short-lived, many of these engagements remain unexamined in this thesis. Before repatriating to Norway, one of my research ambitions was to not only study fishing practices of fishermen, but also knowledges and perspectives of fisherwomen. As gendered inequalities in the Pacific reveals, the roles of women in small-scale fisheries and subsistence economies are commonly undervalued and underemphasized in governmental policies regarding fisheries management and development (Mangubhai and Lawless 2021). I did make strides to acquaint myself with Mabulan women who were receiving to the idea of having me participate in some of their fishing activities. However, the limited time of fieldwork made insights to this important domain undocumented and unexamined in detail as a result. This significant part of the village-based subsistence economy should deserve greater attention and recognition in future research.

Furthermore, as discourses of the anticipated effects of climate change are amplified through institutions like the United Nations by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and by Fiji’s significant leadership in climate change negotiations, increased international attention, presence and potential implications are becoming increasingly

manifested in places like the Lau Archipelago. Coinciding with the urgency of climate change, communities find themselves situated between two significant forces; the alteration of ecological circumstances and the responses and attempts to control these effects. As the 2030 SDGs are adopted by national governments and reverberated in NGO initiatives (like the Lau Seascape Strategy), we should study how the implementations of global targets are conditioned and grounded in local realities and experiences. In addition to its conservation-oriented focus on ecological preservation, SDG ambitions also include sometimes mismatched economic targets, such as simultaneous growth and development. Undoubtedly, these global forces have the potentials to affect communities in Lau. Simultaneously, as seen by the creative acts of subsistence economics in relation with past development initiatives on the organic island of Cicia, I am similarly confident to hypothesize that we can expect to witness ways in which communities actively and creatively entangle their social existence within these unfolding processes in the coming future.

My ethnographic aim has not been to romanticize the capacities of people to endure all sorts of crises. As inequalities of the coronavirus pandemic show, a great number of people find themselves in dire and desperate circumstances in places like Fiji. Moreover, in relation to climate change, the material foundation to subsistence economics is fundamentally placed at great risk in places like the Lau Archipelago. My hopeful ambition is that this ethnography somewhat contributes to a greater appreciation of what consequences like ecological degradation will impact if actions to mitigate effects of climate change remain insufficient. Yet, by breaking the dualistic separation of nature and culture, we are required to not only understand how humans can have destructive impacts on ecology. We must continue to examine how the ontology of subsistence resources contributes to social existences, which, by linking sociality with ecology, can expose the creative dimensions of resilience.

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