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Vanua Sauvi

Social roles, sustainability and resilience

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Abstract

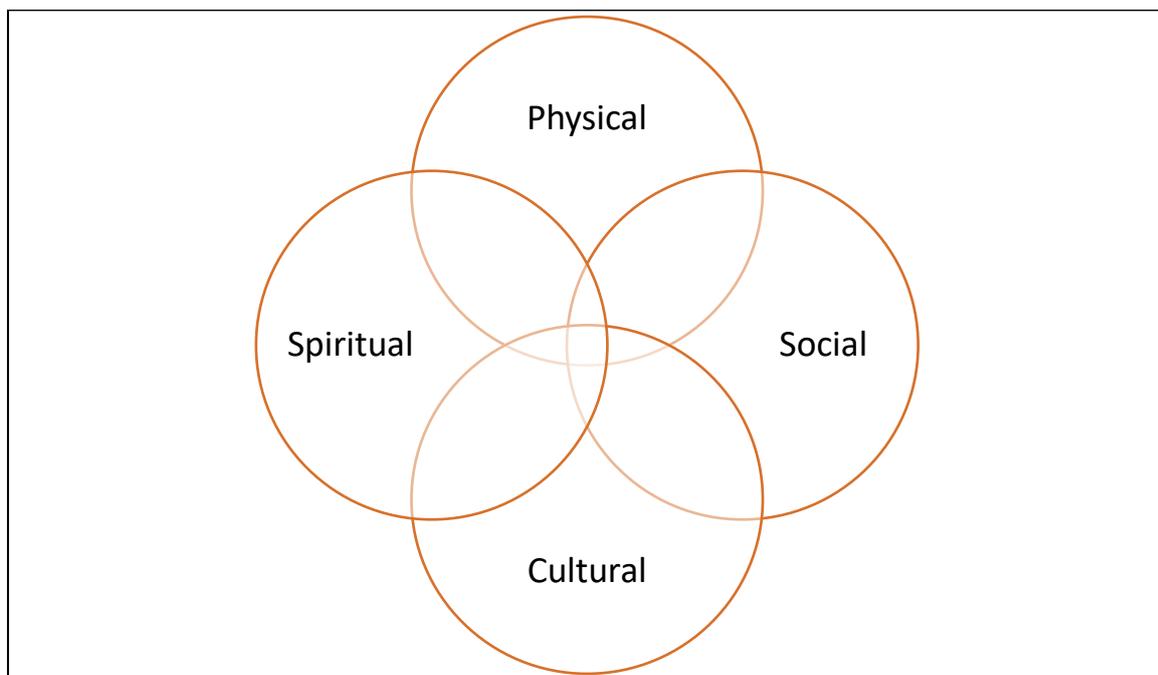
Vanua, for an indigenous Fijian, encompasses the land, the sea, the cosmos, the people – all living things, including spirits, in a specific ‘place’ and how each of them are related to and responsible for each other. It also includes the culture, traditions, knowledge, skills, and ways of knowing, love, peace, prosperity and communalism. In the indigenous Fijian psyche, *vanua* embodies social institutions responsible for the management of the *vanua*. Each member of the *vanua* is ascribed into one of these social institutions. The members of these social institutions are equipped with traditional knowledge, skills and wisdom that enable them to be responsible guardians of the *vanua*, managing it so that it is sustainable and resilient and safeguarding it for the next generation. This chapter explores the significance of these social institutions in the sustainability and resilience of the *vanua* in this climate change era. Using an Indigenist research approach, a case study was conducted on a coastal village of Ovalau, Rukuruku, on how their social systems, social roles, knowledge, skills and wisdom enabled sustainability and resilience in this climate change era. It was found that the people of Rukuruku managed to forecast the change in climate, save their *vanua* from coastal erosion, and ensure both food and human security through the practice of their social roles, knowledge, skills and wisdom.

Introduction

Vanua is defined as a ‘universal whole’ (Nabobo-Baba, 2011) consisting of four interrelated dimensions: physical, social, cultural and spiritual (Ravuvu, 1983; Tuwere, 2002, Nabobo-Baba, 2006; and Lagi, 2014). The physical dimension includes the land, water, rivers, flora, fauna, forest, fishing grounds, house sites and foundations, sky, sea and people; the social dimensions include social hierarchies, the relationship between people and the relationship between the people and the *vanua*. Each indigenous Fijian is a member of a *vuvale* (nuclear family), *itokatoka* (extended family), *mataqali* (clan) and *yavusa* (tribe), and has responsibilities for taking care of each other. The cultural dimensions include the beliefs, knowledge systems, cultures and values. Caring and sharing are two major qualities of indigenous Fijians’ values systems and so are *yalomalua* (humble), *vakarokoroko* (deference), *veivukei* (helpful), *veinanumi* (being considerate), *veilomani* (loving), *vakarorogo* (attentive and compliant) and *yalovata* (working together). Finally, the spiritual dimensions include *mana* (power), *sautu* (peace and prosperity), *sau* (authority and dominance), *yalo* (spirits) and *vanua tabu* (sacred places), which include *sau tabu* (burial sites for chiefs), *yavu* (house foundations) and *vanua sauvi* (terrestrial and sea areas restricted to be used so as to restore their resources,

power and wealth). Sacred places are feared, revered and respected by people. They are protected by the spirits of the ancestors who are the protectorates of the vanua, ensuring that their descendants maintain and safeguard the *vanua* (Ravuvu, 1983; Tuwere, 2002; Nabobo-Baba, 2011; and Lagi, 2014). *Vanua* in summary is the Indigenous Fijian in totality, having connections physically, socially, culturally and spiritually to a place, its people, culture and surroundings, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Vanua in summary



The *vanua* gives indigenous Fijians a sense of belonging (Ravuvu, 1983). It is their source of livelihood and basis of life that holds life together and gives it its meaning (Tuwere, 2002). It is essential for indigenous Fijians as it is the essence for their identity and existence (Nabobo-Baba; 2011, p. 4). To ensure the connectedness of a child to one's *vanua*, the *vakalutu buto ni gone* ceremony is held after the fourth night of a child's birth. The child's umbilical cord is planted, usually with a coconut plant or the child's totem plant, and a feast is held to celebrate the new life. This ceremony is significant because it will ensure that the child will always return to his or her home. A child whose umbilical cord is not buried/planted is believed to be lost and always searching for his/her identity later on in life (Lagi, 2014).

The *Vanua* concept can also be described by using a *salusalu* (garland) as a metaphor, where its different flowers represent the different parts of the *Vanua* (physical, cultural, social and spiritual); each flower performs its own roles, complementing each other and ensuring the existence of the *Vanua*. If one of the flowers falls, it will lead to the falling apart of the entire *salusalu* (garland). Similarly, if one of the members of the *Vanua* does not perform his or her roles and responsibilities, it can lead to the destruction or discontinuity of the *Vanua*.

Figure 2: Salusalu Metaphor



Sauvi is derived from the word *sau*, which means being imbued with *mana* (Tuwere, 2002). It also means power, prosperity, effectiveness and sustainability that leads to wellbeing, which is achieved when people adhere to their social roles. *Vanua Sauvi* is the process of bringing *mana* effectiveness, power, richness and wealth back to a *vanua* (place). This is an indigenous Fijian concept of conserving resources through the use of traditional protocols; land and sea resource use are restricted to allow the *vanua* to restore its resources. A traditional ceremony is held to traditionally *tabu* (close or restrict) the use of resources from a specific given area for a specific time, and subsequently a traditional ceremony is held to open or un-hold the restriction. If anyone disobeys the restriction, the person will be *ore* (punished traditionally). Indigenous Fijians perceive *vanua* holistically; as noted earlier, it includes the physical, cultural and spiritual aspects of a place and their relationship to each other. Each aspect cannot exist without the others – they are interdependent. This study examines the practice of *Vanua Sauvi* as a conservation, food and human security strategy that contributes to sustainability and resilience.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach grounded in indigenous research philosophies and principles. Since this study focused on understanding indigenous people's perception of climate change and how they use indigenous knowledge and skills to adapt to climate change, it was vital to use appropriate indigenous Fijian methods. The main method of collecting data was *talanoa* or storytelling – a process where two or more people talk together; this can be done in an informal way where it is conducted in a light-hearted manner and other people can be called to join in, or in a formal manner where attendance is limited and *yaqona* may be served (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). During *talanoa* the storyteller structures the conversation, while the researcher asks follow-up questions. This allows the participants to express themselves freely, permitting a multifaceted insight into the topic that enhances understanding (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). Since this study was conducted among indigenous Fijian communities, *talanoa* was selected because it was the most culturally appropriate method to use. It is important that culturally appropriate research methods are used with indigenous people

(Otsuka, 2006; Nabobo-Baba 2006; Farrelly & Nabob-Baba, 2012).

This study was carried out in a coastal village, Rukuruku, on the island of Ovalau. A *sevusevu* or traditional request to the chief to carry out research in the village was made to the Roko Matairua, the chief. After approval was given by the chief, *talanoa* sessions were held with the elders whom the chief selected because they are custodians of the knowledge and skills investigated. The chief also gave permission for the researcher to *talanoa* with parents and younger members of the community. A communal *talanoa* participatory workshop was held after the *talanoa* with the elders, to verify whether or not knowledge shared by the elders was the same as that held by other members of the village. The *talanoa* sessions were conducted in the Standard Fijian language and transcribed by the researcher, who is a linguist and is fluent in the Standard Fijian language.

To validate the data given by the participants, the researcher also used *vakadigova* observation as a method. In indigenous Fijian communities it is vital that researchers *vakadigova* (observe) the task at hand well before imitating or practicing it. Photographs of practices observed were taken and triangulated with data collected from the *talanoa* sessions.

Vanua Sauvi

Vanua Sauvi is similar to the Western concept of 'no take' zones, seasonal bans and temporary closure of fishing areas, as practiced by the Fijian governments in the Marine Protected Area (MPA) and the Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMA) programmes. However, while the MPA and LMMA programmes are temporary closures for sea areas only, *Vanua Sauvi* includes the temporary closure of both land and sea areas. In addition, the *Vanua Sauvi* concept is always initiated and enforced by the village governance institutions and members of the community, whereas the MPA and LMMA programmes are usually initiated by Fisheries Ministries and Western conservation groups.

Vanua Sauvi is a concept derived from customary law to ensure the maintenance and sustainable use of resources for all the members of the community to share and enjoy for their survival. According to Indigenous Fijians' custom, the land is owned by everyone and must be respected and used wisely. Indigenous Fijians have a very close relationship with their *vanua* and rely on it for their survival. The *vanua* is a source of their livelihood, food, medicine, knowledge, income, tradition, kinship, values and customs. The destruction of the *vanua* will bring detrimental effects on the people (Lagi, 2015). Hence, customary laws related to the protection of land and sea resources are vital for their survival.

Indigenous Fijian communities have clans that have specific social roles to govern different functions of the society. There are seven social roles in the Indigenous Fijian community. They are: the *turaga* (chief), *sauturaga* (chief executive), *matanivanua* (herald), *bete* (priest), *bati* (warrior), *mataisau* (carpenter) and the *gonedau* (fisherfolk). Each position has varying roles and responsibilities to ensure the good governance and survival of the *vanua*: the chief's role is to lead and make appropriate decisions, the chief executive's role is to enforce the decisions made by the chief and members of the chiefly clan, the herald is the *vanua*'s spokesperson, the priest's role is to ensure the spiritual connection of the people; the warrior's role is to protect the *vanua* from any harm and ensure the protection and maintenance of land resources; the carpenter's role is to ensure the maintenance of the chief's house and boat; and the fisherfolk's role is to provide fish for the chief and protect and ensure the maintenance of sea resources. These social roles require specific skills and knowledge for their effective implementation. Hence, Indigenous Fijian children are socialised into specific skills and knowledge when growing up so that they can perform their social roles effectively. This knowledge and skills are learned orally through songs, dances, stories, and through observation and practice (Lagi,

2015), and are performed to safeguard the *vanua*, ensuring its sustainability for the future generation.

In the *Vanua Sauvi* concept, it is the role of the warrior and fisherfolk's clan to enforce the customary law of the temporary closure of specific areas for a specific time; failure to respect this law will lead to an *ore* (traditional punishment) on the perpetrator. It is believed that sometimes before the clan can inflict punishment, the *vanua* punishes the perpetrator first, in the form of sickness or death.

There are 217 locally managed marine protected areas in Fiji, many of which are following the *Vanua Sauvi* concept; however, they only restrict the use of marine areas but not terrestrial areas (Clements, et al., 2012). Also, the restriction is usually only for a short period of time, compared to the *Vanua Sauvi* concept in Rukuruku. But whether the restriction is temporary or permanent or only covers the marine and not the terrestrial area, there is always an abundance of resources recovered. Generally, more resources are recovered in areas that have a longer period of restriction.

The *Vanua Sauvi* approach is still practiced in some areas in Fiji. Rukuruku village on Ovalau is one of the places where this concept is practiced. Rukuruku is a village located on a bay on the eastern coast of Ovalau, Fiji. Its coastal location does not spare it from the impacts of climate change. The village is affected with sea level rise, causing coastal erosion and the depletion of land and sea resources. To ensure the maintenance and survival of the *vanua*, this village uses the village governance institutions as a way of governing and maintaining its resources by implementing the *Vanua Sauvi* concept.



In 2011 a restriction on the use of land and sea resources at the eastern end of Rukuruku village was enforced. No one was allowed to cut trees, plant or use resources from the specified land and sea area. A traditional protocol was followed to ensure that all the members of the community were informed of the restriction and would respect it. Two poles woven with

coconut leaves were put up to mark the boundaries of the restricted area. These poles indicated to the villagers and *vulagi* (guests) that the area is restricted and no one should enter it without prior approval from *Rokomatairua* (village chief).

During these years of restriction, the villagers witnessed a vast change in the area that has been restricted from use. Lost plant and fish species have been restored and have had spillover effects. Surplus fish and sea resources from the *Vanua Sauvi* have spilled over to the non-restricted areas, providing food for the villagers and a source of income as the surplus fish and sea resources are sold. Furthermore, the re-growth mangrove forest has acted as a nursery, producing more fish and sea resource species, at the same time acting as a barrier slowing coastal erosion, a problem the villagers were facing before the implementation of the restriction.

In the forest area, lost plant species have re-grown and the forest cover provides foliage that contributes to the growth of new plants and supplies nutrients for plants planted in non-restricted areas. In addition, endemic fruits such as *Tarawau* (*Anacardiaceae*) and *Dawa* (*Ponnetia Pinnata*) that were believed to have become extinct were bearing fruit again, and crops such as *Yaqona* (*Piper methysticum*) and *Dalo* (*Taro*) that were planted in nearby farms were having a high yield. Furthermore, landslides that usually happen in this area have been prevented due to the re-growth of plants. Moreover, the forest acted as a reservoir, producing water to the river that is a source of water for the villagers, which for the last five years had been drying up.

Additionally, this approach has contributed to the maintenance of the indigenous climate change adaptation method, conserving the knowledge and passing it down to the younger generation. Since the concept of *vanua sauvi* is practiced in the village, the children are able to learn from it and continue the practice in the future, hence conserving an important sustainable traditional knowledge and skill.

The *Vanua Sauvi* practice in Rukuruku has contributed to the conservation of knowledge, skills, and land and sea resources. In addition, it has led to food and human security for the people of Rukuruku, who now have surplus food available and are safeguarded from landslides and coastal erosion. It is evident that the re-growth of the forest and mangrove forest can act as a carbon sink, absorbing and storing carbon from the atmosphere. Doing this will reduce the concentration of carbon in the atmosphere, while at the same time reducing the impacts of climate change on their environment, upon which they rely for their livelihood.

In the *vanua* concept, everyone and everything is related (Lagi, 2014); hence it can be said that terrestrial and marine resources are related and are dependent on each other. Therefore, the Rukuruku people's use of the *Vanua Sauvi* concept can be seen to have contributed to the higher yields in both the restricted terrestrial and marine areas. Consequently, restricting the use of resources in both these areas has created a balance in the biodiversity of the restricted areas, allowing Rukuruku to be resilient and bounce back from the impacts of climate change, at the same time sustaining its resources for its future generations.

Percy et al. (2003) have stressed the significance of the forest as a carbon sink, absorbing and storing carbon; Duarte et al. (2008) have also highlighted the importance of mangrove forests and the sea as a storage of carbon or carbon sink. The terrestrial and marine ecosystems share a role of absorbing and reducing carbon in the atmosphere through the forest cover and accumulated sediments, thereby reducing the flow and turbulence of waves and decreasing the rate of coastal erosion. More than half of the carbon in the atmosphere is absorbed by marine living organisms (Falkowski & González et al., 2008; Simon et al., 2009). One hectare of mangrove forest can capture from 1.5 tons to 4 tons of carbon (Mangrove for Fiji, 2016). The area under study consists of about a quarter of a hectare of mangrove forest, which in this case should capture more than half a ton of carbon. Imagine if the 19 villages on Ovalau conserve the same area of mangroves: this will total about 9.5 tons of carbon captured, which means a

slight reduction in temperatures in the atmosphere. The reduction of carbon in the atmosphere creates a balance in temperature in the atmosphere, reducing the intensity of climate change impacts, not only on Rukuruku but globally as well.

The success of the *vanua sauvi* concept practiced by the people of Rukuruku displays the *sau* effectiveness of the *vanua* and the significance of all of the dimensions working together, as manifested in the *salusalu* metaphor. All members of the *vanua* know who they are, what their roles and responsibilities are, and use their traditional knowledge and skills to interact harmoniously with their surroundings, creating a more resilient and sustainable *vanua*.

Concluding Remarks

It would be useful to conduct quantitative research on carbon sequestration in sites such as Rukuruku; research on the quantity of resources recovered in the past five years of restriction would also be beneficial. A replication of this research in other Pacific Island Countries is proposed so that people will better understand what it means to live, survive and thrive during this climate change era. As I conclude, I ponder on the *salusalu* (garland) metaphor that compares that *vanua* to a *salusalu* whose flowers all have a part to play in the beauty and in holding the garland together, keeping it from falling apart. Similarly, in the *vanua* every indigenous Fijian is ascribed a role to play for the successful management of the *vanua*. If a person does not perform his or her role, it will lead to the collapse of the *vanua*. Hence it is vital that when an indigenous Fijian child is born, his or her family and community prioritise the teaching and learning of social roles and cultural responsibilities in the safeguarding of Indigenous Knowledge, cultural practices and sustainable lifestyles. In Rukuruku, since the traditional fisherfolks and warriors knew their roles and performed them effectively, they were able to rescue Rukuruku from the impacts of climate change, creating a more resilient and sustainable *vanua*.

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