



‘You can only do that “outside the village”’

Envy, communal pressure, spatiality and accumulation of agricultural land around Nairukuruku, Naitasiri, Viti Levu, Fiji

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Abstract

Some authors have suggested that agricultural land in Fiji is ever scarcer and concentrated in the hands of a relative few, while others suggest that social forces owing to a felt land scarcity in native Fijian villages repress and reverse accumulation. This paper explores this idea by examining the relationships among felt land scarcity, communal forces for equality, and tenure transformations in native Fijian villages. With a case study of the village of Nairukuruku, the findings suggest a felt land scarcity can lead a community collectively to use denigration to deter its members from accumulating land or, in the face of land accumulation, to reinforce communal principles. Three implications are then discussed. First, accumulation and commercialism are not automatically detrimental to communal practices on the land. Secondly, the processes of and reactions to accumulation where commercial agriculture is largely absent may be distinct from the processes and reaction in more commercialised villages. Finally, persistence in the communal deterrence of accumulation until all available land is ‘communally’ occupied may be short lived as the individual consolidation of land holdings may rise up and transform the rural Fiji’s tenure system.

Keywords:

commercial agriculture; communalism; customary tenure; Fiji; individualism; land scarcity; land tenure



The issue and the formation of the hypothesis

The context of land scarcity

ONE WHO HAS READ THE LITERATURE ON FIJI'S LAND ISSUES SHOULD ALREADY be aware that there is a looming potential for a land crisis. Widely known are the crises that Indo-Fijians face due to the expiry of leases and their expulsion from the lands (Naidu & Reddy 2002) but in addition to this, some native Fijian communities are also threatened by inadequate land availability (Overton 1989, 1992; Ward 1985). In many areas populations have grown steadily while the land area available has declined, either in per capita terms as population growth outpaces land expansions (Ravuvu 1988); in relative terms as inequalities in *mataqali* endowments solidify (Overton 1989); or in absolute terms as salination and degradation diminish the total land area (Overall 1993). Aggravating the issue is that the tenure system is entrenched in the institution of the *mataqali*, engendering an 'arbitrary form of economic inequity' out of the large discrepancies in each *mataqali*'s per capita endowment (Spate 1959:11).

Population pressure does not always produce impoverishment and environmental degradation. As well, a grave land crisis is not quite upon Fiji, thanks to features inherent in rural Fiji, such as a smaller population, a 'safety net' woven into the customary tenure system and 'Fijian way' of life, and a generally protective and egalitarian rural community. Still, to a small yet not-insignificant extent, a Fijian crisis has manifested since the 1980s. Surveys conducted for the Fiji Employment and Development Mission of 1982–83 (Bienefeld 1984) note decreased rates of customary 'borrowing' of land compared to the post-war era, while in the interior of Viti Levu, if not beyond, an increase in land disputes was observed. There and elsewhere, in places such as Draubuta village (Lasaqa 1984; Nayacakalou 1978; Overton 1987, 1992; Spate 1959), Cautata village (Overton 1987, 1992; Ravuvu 1988), Nakorovou village (Overall 1993) and Nakorosule village (Ravuvu 1988) land scarcity has threatened the livelihoods and even the food supply of the villagers. For Cautata village Overton (1992:335) describes the situation as 'desperate'.

Ward's (1985, 1987) depiction of land availability in rural Fiji is perhaps the most portentous:

It seems that real land deprivation does exist, and will increase among Fijian people . . . The current trends in the use and allocation of land still held under customary tenure systems suggest that village communities will not be able to continue to absorb growing numbers of people in the semi-subsistence economy beyond the next five to ten years unless major changes in land use practices occur. (Ward 1985:41)

Ward's analysis discusses an emerging 'concentration' of land insofar as the 'haves' possess lands or have access to quality land while the 'have nots'—generally, populous Fijian communities in unfavourable locations—expand outwards over the remaining and ever-more-broken lands. Relatively fixed factors such as a high rate of population growth and an overall paucity of quality lands are implicated, yet more determinable social, cultural and economic factors also aggravate the capacity of Fijian villages to absorb new members. These include entrenched inequalities of mataqali land endowments, increasing material demands, a proliferation of cash cropping (implying an increase in per capita acreage under cultivation with a simultaneous 'locking up' of lands and reduction in the proportion of land considered usable), the valuation of land as an economic asset (thereby precluding non-monetary reciprocal customs of land exchange), and general trends towards individualism, monetisation and the abatement of customary land tenure.

A conceptualisation of personal accumulation versus communal protectionism

Ward's (1985) allusion to social differentiation necessitates a consideration of Overton's (1989, 1992) findings. Overton (1992) notes that while many lacked land in the villages of Cautata and Draubuta (Table 1), accumulation (and differentiation) was, in fact, on the decline. In Overton's study villages, formal leasing was reduced to zero and traditional leasing (*vakavanua*, *kerekere*, *kana veicurumaki*, customary tenure or what have you) was likewise being practised far less than usual. Additionally, lending to one's fellow mataqali member or even garden expansion over land of one's own mataqali were restricted and declining. There was a negative correlation between scarcity and *individual* accumulation at the community level; the more pronounced the scarcity, the less individualism manifested in practice. This is as one might expect, yet this correlation is not straightforward; individualism *does* gather under conditions of scarcity. However, it rarely manifests *in practice*.



Table 1 Per capita land holdings within the mataqali in Draubuta, Rewa, Fiji

	1954	1970	1986
Minimum	0.1 ha	0.8 ha	0.18 ha
Maximum	7.2 ha	7.2 ha	1.72 ha
Mean	0.85 ha	0.53 ha	0.43 ha

Sources 1954 – Spate (1959)
 1970 – Lasaqa (1984);
 Nayacakalou (1978)
 1986 – Overton (1987)

The decline of accumulation is not so much attributed to a decline of the individual’s desire for land—reportedly, under conditions of scarcity most villagers want to acquire more land for their security. Rather, Overton (1992) subtly attributes the declining rate of accumulation to a ‘communal force’ in the village.¹ As this paper corroborates, the mentality of mutual protection and collective control of mataqali land may restrain the forces of accumulation. Each individual member of the collective may wish to accumulate, yet each member is restrained from doing so by the collective-level management of the land, to which they are a contributing element. As Overton writes:

The tendency now is to limit accumulation and, more than that, to reverse the process. Even with the *metaqali* and the traditional mechanisms of land allocation, no individual seems able to get more than a fair share of land . . . There is a limit to the extent of land accumulation that will be tolerated by a community under pressure and thus, in these villages at least, there is no process of differentiation that is separating one group from another. Under pressure, land tenancy is operating in a way that puts a priority on providing the means of subsistence for many over providing the means of accumulation for a few. (1992:336)

The core of this research comprises the collective vis-à-vis its members’ desires under conditions of scarcity, and how each endures the pressures of the other. The question to be explored is: how does ‘*communality*’—manifested in family relations, labour arrangements, land allocations, customs, regulatory functions or other practices that elevate the collective—adapt to a deepening



shortage of land available to members of the collective? In other words, under conditions of scarcity, which pole of the individual–collective dichotomy triumphs, or is the situation so simple as this in the first place? The present research suggests it is not. Both individualistic desires and collective principles may coexist in a tense yet endurable relationship.

Nairukuruku, Naitasiri, Viti Levu, Fiji Islands

Nairukuruku village is situated in the Wainimala river basin in northeastern Naitasiri province. Extensive forests present guises of abundant and fertile land, yet the land's expanse dwarfs its small carrying capacity and difficult access.² The majority of lands accessible from the village are hilly to very steeply sloped, of low to very low fertility, amenable to only infrequent cultivation and suitable for one or two consecutive seasons of *tavioka* (cassava) and, occasionally in some pockets, one additional season of a more nutritious crop such as *dalo* (taro). The land is highly erodible; indeed, some parts of it cleared of forest too eagerly in the past are now useless even for the shifting cultivation of *tavioka*. Tree crops and protective forest cover are recommended as the 'optimal' use of these lands for their protective properties (Twyford & Wright 1965).

Nestled in this marginal land is a nucleus of more agreeable and accessible land hugging the banks of the Wainimala River on which the village is situated. This flatter to gently rolling land, fairly well drained and of moderate to low fertility, is also amenable mainly to two seasons of *tavioka*. A wider range of more nutritious crops such as *dalo* and *kumala* (sweet potato) can be grown in some pockets. Again, however, these can be grown only for one season, or two at the most, occasionally with one or perhaps two seasons of *tavioka* succeeding them and still, as always, there must be care to fallow the land for some (i.e. from 4 to 7) years afterwards. The number of years depends on many factors but always guarantees that a great deal less land is actually available than would seem at first to be the case. As a general rule only one-seventh to one-fifteenth of this region's land area is available for cultivation in any one season, due to the necessity of fallowing (Twyford & Wright 1965:245). Wright and Twyford (unpub. 1959) estimate that for Wainimala *tikina* (district) immediately opposite the river from Nairukuruku, the area

amenable to cultivation without major improvements to the land is only 4.3% of the total.

Short of conducting an extensive census of the region it is impossible to offer meaningful population-to-land-area ratios for Nairukuruku. However, some inferences can be made from census data (Table 2). Two facts must first be considered: first, that only one-seventh to one-fifteenth of the land is actually under cultivation in any one season; secondly, that whereas 0.3 acres (0.121 hectares) per person are needed for subsistence cultivation in the region (Barrau 1955; Ward 1960), this figure has reached 1.0 acre (0.405 hectares) per person when commercial cultivation occurred in tandem with subsistence cultivation (Ward 1960:41). Therefore, when Nairukuruku's 1996 census population of 244 persons is considered alongside these facts, it is seen that it may *require* (as opposed to *use* in a single season) anywhere from 750 acres (303 hectares)³ for purely subsistence cultivation to a more realistic figure reaching well over 1000 acres (405 hectares).⁴

Table 2 Populations of Nairukuruku Village and select neighbouring villages,* Naitasiri Province, Fiji 1946–1996 (Ethnic Fijians only)

Year/Village	1946	1956	1966	1976	1986	1996
Nairukuruku	181	129	185	197	247	244
Taulevu	54	57	61	58	60	80
Waidacia	53	50	96	121	159	146
Naivucini	194	254	283	274	361	413
Saumakia	46	76	69	98	98	164
Nabena	30	52	52	55	55	51
Korovou	30	–	98	–	98	139
Naluwai	112	187	169	242	343	333
Nasavu	32	63	–	84	117	121
Nakorosule	125	237	309	154	302	262

* All villages are within four-mile radius of Nairukuruku

Source Census Department (1996); Fiji Bureau of Statistics (1988; 1977; 1968; 1958; 1947).



These requirements are judged against the Native Land Commission's (1959) report recording 1220 acres (494 hectares) as 'owned' by Nairukuruku's mataqali. Yet since 1959 many mataqali have become extinct, so that their lands have reverted to the Crown or, more recently, to the *yavusa*, which may then reallocate the lands to any number of constituent mataqali remaining in the region. This figure of 1220 is diminished further as 386 acres (156 hectares) of this land is held by mataqali with membership extending from Nairukuruku to three other villages whose populations have their own needs and which also find themselves in pressing situations.⁵

Thus this figure of 1220 acres (494 hectares) is, if anything, greater than the present-day extent of land availability in Nairukuruku. It seems that the mataqali of Nairukuruku are reaching the boundaries of their lands as well as the limits of availability and sustainability in the greater region, to say nothing of the diminishing accessibility of broken and mountainous lands increasingly sought out further and further away from the village. Over the last fifty years there has been a very dramatic increase in populations of the region officially enumerated as living within the 'remainder of district' or 'in localities under twenty households', that is, in settlements too small and scattered to enumerate as a single entity.⁶ This fact suggests that increasing pressures on land resources are forcing some to disperse outwards, away from the village and towards the remaining pockets of hidden arable land.

Despite emigration from the village, the populations of some mataqali have overgrown their land base to a point where the livelihoods are under a pressure never before experienced. Ravuvu (1988) describes for Nakorosule that whereas shifting cultivation once dominated (at least as recently as 1958 [Ward 1960]) permanent cultivation is now unavoidable. At the same time, villagers are quicker to exert modern rights of exclusivity over 'their' land—even when it is of the mataqali—and to push others to the margins. Yet Ravuvu (1988) and the present study also make clear that the traditional practice of vakavanua has persisted locally, and that it has done so for the simple reason that some mataqali land is inadequate to provide for the *subsistence* needs of its members. However, the practice of vakavanua must now accommodate the fact that comfortable excesses of land are no longer common in the region. In the words of one resident of Nairukuruku, despite there being land enough for



some, there are still many facing a shortage, and *'those with plenty and those with little are coming together into new arrangements because of this shortage'*. This paper examines these new arrangements.

The methodology

During the period of the researcher's stay in Nairukuruku, five focus group discussions and four subsequent group interviews were undertaken. The first interview was with Pita (30), a son of the *vunivalu*, who has lived in Suva for many years.⁷ The second involved three men: Pita, Joseva (35), another son of the *vunivalu*, who moved back to the village to practise subsistence farming after quitting *galala* life,⁸ and Saimone (45), a subsistence farmer and brother of the *vunivalu*. The third interview was with Pita and the Ratu (the *vunivalu*) himself, a man in his 70s who is head of his *mataqali*, his village and much of the surrounding lands in Naitasiri. The fourth interview involved the *vunivalu*, Pita and Saimone, and was meant to allow for elaboration and comment on earlier accounts. In sum, all respondents are members of the chiefly *mataqali* and the same four participants, as well as their wives and adult children, also participated in the focus group discussions that laid a foundation for the interviews. An audio recorder was utilised to produce exact transcripts of accounts and allow for consistent interpretation.

Respondents were purposely sampled so as to engage those specially positioned and with distinctive life experience. Neither interview questions nor their ordering was standardised, as the casualness of the interviews, the comfort level of the respondents and especially, their unique subjectivities, all persuaded against this. Also, rather than keep the interview schedule unchanging and, therefore, rooted in any predisposition, an unstructured and evolving process presented respondents with a progressive space to organise concepts cumulatively and collectively, while still respecting their subjectivity.

The interviews achieved these goals principally by employing an 'inductive learning curve' and 'running with the responses' in the interview process. Lines of enquiry that were met with indifference were discarded while new themes, gleaned from preceding interviews and focus group discussions, laid a foundation for subsequent enquiries. In essence, each and every interview was an evolution of the preceding one. As the interview process progressed,



respondents' conceptualisations and priorities were increasingly promoted to the fore by their constant absorption and reiteration by the process. In this way interviews came to focus on fewer and fewer recurring themes, taken to be the ones amongst all those discussed that the respondents found most relevant.

Interview accounts were transformed into findings by their reading, rereading, convergence with *and* divergence from the literature and the themes of other interviews. Verbatim quotations supportive of arguments were selected in accordance with their ability to exemplify an argument *and* their representativeness of the others' accounts. While representativeness is not a major concern of qualitative research, it is helpful to cross-reference accounts within an identifiable group so that the discussion is not reduced to multiple, mutually exclusive individuals or to a unique, non-comparable social group (Baxter & Eyles 1997; Cloke et al. 1997).⁹ This methodology was designed in strict adherence to Baxter and Eyles's (1997) criteria for rigour in qualitative research.¹⁰

Constructs developed from the interview accounts

Note must be taken at the outset that a community's association with land scarcity is extremely complex and, in the ambiguous everyday reality of Fijian culture, at times contradictory. For example, reports are given in the interviews of a great envy and animosity held by the community against those villagers who have acquired relatively large plots of land or who have achieved commercial success. As Pita remarks in relation to what may come about in his community after fencing off of a portion of his mataqali land, thereby signalling exclusivity in its use:

There will be hatred for fencing off the land; they will hate us for it. There will be a great animosity. This land will be like gold someday (due to population growth in the village). There will be great envy; the others will like to see our downfall for it.

Such a statement leaves one inclined to believe that community-level envy may repress individual desires for accumulation. Yet the ambiguity of Fijian social life abounds. One of the most authoritative works on the subject of Fijian life cites a case in Nakorosule in which envy was actually a driving force for accumulation of land and cattle (the latter, especially, symbolising status in modern-day Fijian culture):



[A villager] asked his *mataqali* if he could lease almost all the good gardening land belonging to his group near the village. He told them that he was going to develop their land into a good grazing area, for the cattle belonging to all *mataqali* members. The *mataqali* members were impressed with the idea of having a *mataqali* cattle ranch for which they would be envied by other *mataqali* within the village. (Ravuvu 1988:135–6)

This villager later used his lease to exclude his *mataqali* members from their land, thereby corroborating Ravuvu's conclusion that in the context of traditional culture and *mataqali* land, 'development for the individual [is] detrimental to the welfare of the majority' (1988:137).

But what of the converse? What does the development of the majority mean for the individual? Or must Ravuvu's conclusion always hold true in times of scarcity?

Despite occasional contradiction, it is put forth here that this envy and animosity act as communal mechanisms to impede individual accumulation, that is those types of accumulation that threaten *koro* (village) values (such as egalitarianism) and *koro* livelihoods. It would appear that such mechanisms impede both individual *and* group accumulation, especially in relation to commercial endeavours, and in different ways with respect to location and impediment. For now it can only be assumed that such mechanisms would intensify in proportion to the degree of land scarcity. Yet what is suggested by the present research is not simply that communal mechanisms protect the majority in times of scarcity. Rather, individuals may still accumulate, as long as they do so in a manner that strengthens communal relations, thereby benefiting the individual by freeing much needed land, as well as the community by bolstering the mores and resources of collective health. These points are elaborated below.

Envy, animosity and the communal repression of accumulation

The relationship between accumulation, envy and stigma was demonstrated most vividly during an interview with Pita, Joseva and Saimone in which the three jokingly imitated witches brewing an evil potion. The potion represented a mixture of ill fortune that villagers of Nairukuruku secretly concoct against one of their own who achieves agricultural success or some kind of accumulation in front of the rest. As Saimone remarks during the mimicking:



When you get success, they envy you, they jealous, and when they envy you they want to spoil it, everybody want to spoil you.

Pita also remarks:

They will see your success and they will not like it. They will envy you and wish you poorly for it. You have land; you feel big but then they will name you badly, as a man down low.

The Ratu's comments are congruent with the others in substantiating envy's restraint on an individual's accumulation and the wealth he may generate from it. In relation to the latent desire to accumulate in conditions of scarcity, for example, the Ratu describes how 'every villager wants something of their own when land is hard to get', despite persisting communal ideals. This echoes the comments of Pita and Saimone: that 'in scarcity all the people want their own piece of land'. In this way land scarcity seemingly strengthens an ever-growing undercurrent of individualism in the Fijian village (Ravuvu 1988). This appears to contradict Overton's (1987, 1992) evidence that communal ideals and practices on the land, and not individualism, increase with land scarcity. However, the hypothesis is still intact; greater detail only amends Overton's evidence, for, as the respondents explain, through envy's stigma there are restrictions on *how* one accumulates.

Early in the interviews the Ratu carefully explained the difference between an individual's accumulation and that of a sub-group, such as a *tokatoka*.¹¹ The difference is traced back to the purpose of collectively held land. On the one hand, the land is for the benefit of the *vanna* and all its sub-clans and therefore it is generally acceptable for a *tokatoka* to accumulate a large area of land 'inside the village', even during times of scarcity—as might a cooperative. But this behaviour is unacceptable for any individual member acting alone. The individual would create tension and invite scorn for such accumulation, whereas the *tokatoka* would not, so long as it shared the land and its wealth among its members in an egalitarian manner, that is, free from reference to a member's productivity or merit.

On the other hand, when the topic switched from accumulation (i.e. garden expansion) to commercial agriculture (i.e. expansion of banana plantings for the market) the distinction between the sub-clan and the



individual was retracted. In commercial contexts it was inappropriate for *anyone* to accumulate 'inside the village', be they a sub-clan or an individual; they would have to go 'outside the village' for that. Should either the tokatoka or the individual take up land 'in the village' in a manner creating status or wealth that would elevate them above fellow villagers then, as the vunivalu opined, that person or group may well be seen as 'greedy', 'like they want to make money'. This, it was explained, 'is sinful for it all goes back to the Bible'. Such accumulators must go 'outside the village' to avoid being stigmatised.

You can only do that 'outside the village'

This code has its own consequences. For one, it discourages accumulation amongst the villagers of Nairukuruku, as the land that they are forced to seek 'outside the village' is situated at a distance in neighbouring villages and is recognised as the preserve of the mataqali of those villages. On the other hand, male villagers spend on average only two hours a day in their gardens (Ravuvu 1988), and so they may have the time to walk the distance. Also, should villagers disperse cultivation to outer lands, and especially if they disperse settlements to outer lands, then remaining lands that were previously inaccessible will be made available to the population, and land scarcity diminished (Spate 1959). Yet if villagers disperse cultivation but not settlement, then food production and quality will suffer, perhaps to precarious levels (Ward 1986, 1994). The 'outside the village' code of accumulation and the census data noted above suggest that both modes of dispersion are occurring, though not necessarily in concert, with sure but not necessarily negative consequences for 'communality'.

Indeed, this code of accumulation holds potential for the reinforcement of 'communality'. Egalitarianism and equality are protected inside the village; accumulators leave a maximum of common garden land inside the village; and customary practices such as vakavanua are perpetuated by accumulators with increased attentiveness, so as to maintain good standing with the owners of increasingly scarce lands. Thus an intangible communal spirit as well as the tangible, protective practices of reciprocity are reinforced. All respondents were of the attitude that should a member of their land scarce mataqali need more land then there is only to present a *sevusevu*¹² to a well-endowed mataqali. The common refrain was, 'If you need more land, just go across the river and present



a tabua.¹⁵ Indeed, to ‘just go across the river and present a tabua’ was chorused as something of a universal solution to the land scarcity. One of several underlying assertions present in all respondents’ accounts is that land and especially its availability to a needy person is dependent on a needy person’s ability to request it *in the customary, reciprocal fashion*.

The idea can be entertained, then, that as land scarcity increases, this inter-mataqali/village vakavanua may increase in frequency, and that ‘communality’ may in this fashion be sustained, even encouraged. Ravuvu’s observations in Nakorosule support this postulation:

There was apparent conflict between customary usage of land to satisfy traditional social and economic obligations of the individual for the maintenance of the *Vanua* co-operation and solidarity, and the need to use land for market production where the maximisation of individual profit was encouraged. This fundamental contradiction facing the land tenure system was a major cause of uneasy relationships between individuals of the same *mataqali* and between *mataqali*. However, the fact that each *mataqali* could not provide all the subsistence needs of its members from its land, made it essential to continue customary land usage (*kana veicurumaki*) to some extent, allowing the land resources of each group to be used by others who need it. It also acted as a stabilising force in the maintenance of harmony and solidarity among the villagers and as an equalising factor in the use of resources. (1988:129)

This very postulation contradicts Overton’s (1992) and Ward’s (1986, 1994) observations that vakavanua *decreases* as land scarcity deepens. While there is a certain degree of truth to this claim, their observations are incomplete. As explained in greater detail below, vakavanua outside the village may *increase* in times of scarcity, and this may have positive outcomes for ‘communality’.

Still, it must be acknowledged that the maintenance of such ‘communal’ practices as reciprocity, vakavanua and the interdependence of individuals, mataqali and villages when lending land do not on their own rule out the possibility of highly individualistic practices occurring simultaneously. Indeed, the plausibility of the ideas suggested here hinges on the assumption that accumulating land ‘outside the village’ promotes a communal interdependence more than it does an independence from the sending community, for surely



it does both. Moreover, Spate's (1959) qualification must be kept in mind: dispersing settlement away from the village will make available previously inaccessible lands, and so reduce overall scarcity and its potential for 'communality' while also promoting independence.

Summary and implications

Transforming land tenure under increasing population pressure

This account suggests that a felt land scarcity in Nairukuruku is associated with certain aspects of 'communality' and the practices involved in its maintenance. Suggested is that there are communal forces and communal purposes attached to the stigmas of envy and animosity that plague an individual or group as they accumulate village land in conditions of scarcity. The interviews also indicated that when such accumulation may produce a status above that of the other villagers, or when the accumulated resources are less 'necessary' than opulent, the individual or group is forced to accumulate 'outside the village', lest they be stigmatised as envious, 'greedy' or worse.¹⁴ In this way accumulation is made more difficult and less efficient, thereby guarding against increasing inequality amongst village members and leaving a maximum of accessible land for other members. More importantly, such mechanisms of acquiring increasingly scarce land oblige accumulators to reinforce and perpetuate communal mechanisms of land tenure and other values associated with 'intra-village communalism'.

It remains to be seen how much these practices will intensify in proportion to increasing scarcity. Is the reciprocity associated with this accumulation truly mutual, or is it more a customary economic rent paid to the landowner? Are land scarce villagers truly benefiting from this code of accumulation, or is this simply a code for the well-off to acquire even more land or 'reciprocal' payments? Clearly further explorations are needed.

By way of conclusion, three broad implications are touched upon: (1) accumulation and scarcity may not automatically mean a breakdown of customary tenure; (2) the reactions to land shortage in 'non-commercially oriented' villages may be distinct from those of 'commercially oriented' villages; and (3) the tenure and spatial arrangements of agriculture around



villages facing land shortages may eventually be pressured into moulds in line with individual values more than communal values.

Breakdown of vakavanua cannot be presumed

There is a tendency in the literature rightfully to associate land scarcity with cash cropping, but then subtly to imply an association between the land scarcity and the breakdown of customary tenure that usually ensues cash cropping (e.g. Ward 1960, 1986, 1994). This is a fallacious relationship as first, scarcity is not always associated with high incidences of commercial agriculture and secondly and more importantly, it is more the 'attitude of commercialism' that is responsible for the breakdown of vakavanua, not the scarcity it imposes per se.

Yet even in the villages studied by Overton (1989, 1992), which are not predominantly commercial, the breakdown of vakavanua has been in part traced back to the growing pressures of land scarcity. Quite understandably, as land becomes less and less available it is lent out less and less frequently, even to fellow villagers, though even in the villages observed by Overton (1989) there were not-insignificant elements of commercial agriculture concentrated in the best lands of the most well endowed mataqali.

The point to be made here—and Nairukuruku is evidence for it—is that limited land availability in a village need not be automatically associated with a breakdown of vakavanua. It is more likely that while scarcity and vakavanua can co-exist for a while—and indeed, that scarcity may actually *encourage vakavanua as an alleviating response*, as in Nairukuruku—the two can co-exist only for so long before eventually, the mounting pressures of scarcity will force an abatement of vakavanua.

Differences in the nature of land shortage under subsistence and commercial conditions

A second implication is that in predominantly subsistence villages such as Nairukuruku, the reaction to land shortage may be distinct from the reaction to land shortage in villages with a higher incidence of cash cropping. Ward (1986, 1994) observes in his case studies of subsistence-to-commercial village transformation that with increasing commercialism in village cultivation there is an associated tightening of the spatial correlation between land ownership and cultivation. Thus in such commercial settings he who cultivates



for the market *or* for subsistence tends to do so only over the land his kin group has legal title to or, in more pronounced cases, only over portions of mataqali land that the individual has claimed. This tightening of the owner–user correlation may lead to land shortage in a number of ways. First, the land area under cultivation drastically increases under cash cropping without a corresponding increase in the number of villagers supported. Secondly, food crops are pushed to the outer marginal and inaccessible lands, as cash crops become concentrated on a more permanent basis on the best lands near the village. Thirdly, individualism, being a by-product of commercialism, becomes superimposed on already unequal mataqali land endowments. These endowments are normally made more equitable by kerekere, but because commercialism tightens the spatial owner–user correlation, and as owners are unwilling to lend land on a near-permanent basis, it also leads to a breakdown of kerekere. Thus much idle land becomes locked up by individuals while many members of land scarce mataqali, who otherwise would have borrowed land, are forced to emigrate. Ward (1994:138) summarises this as it occurred in the Wainibuka Valley in northeast Viti Levu, where ‘the allocation of an undesirably high proportion of the best and most accessible lands to permanent cocoa groves has reduced the area which villagers owning these lands are prepared to make available to residents whose mataqali land lies in the more distant hills’.

What is immediately relevant is that whereas certain mataqali in Nairukuruku are facing land shortage, just as are some mataqali in more commercialised villages, the members of Nairukuruku’s mataqali are behaving in exact opposition to Ward’s observations. In Nairukuruku, to cultivate commercially a villager must go *outside* the village to the land of *another* mataqali, of *another* village, for they *cannot* commercially cultivate over their own land. In other words, in the subsistence case, villagers *do not* become increasingly confined to the spatial boundaries of their own ownership, but rather the opposite is the case. Furthermore, it is the *food crops* inside the village that are displacing the cash crops or other ‘less necessary’ crops outside the village, and not vice versa, as in Ward’s analyses. It would appear that the very same owner–user correlation that tightens in commercial villages remains loose in the subsistence village even as the village experiences the pressures of scarcity. This is supported by the case of the subsistence village of Saliadrau:



Nearly half the land owned by the *mataqali* resident in Saliadrau lies more than two miles from the village and the land between is steep and broken. For all practical purposes the more distant land is almost useless while all the people continue to live within the village . . . The need for more land on which to grow *yaqona* and food crops is now being solved by planting outside the limits of land registered in the names of resident *mataqali* . . . Indeed the villagers' largest gardens are found here. (Ward 1960:44,46)

The case of Nairukuruku suggests that in subsistence villages facing increasing pressures over lands, the owner–user correlation may turn ever more negative, with the spatial extents of ownership and usership *diverging* as the land of one village or *mataqali* is requested more by another village or *mataqali*. Some of the explanation for this lies in the observation that in the commercial cases, scarcity grows out of a certain manner of land usage, whereas in the subsistence cases the land use pattern grows out of the context of scarcity.

*A new spatiality and tenure transformation of future agriculture
around land scarce villages*

Perhaps the most significant implication is the one that can be drawn from Boserup's theory of agricultural intensification and tenure transformation under population pressure in developing nations. Boserup (1965) explains how under conditions of limited land resources and increasing population pressure an agricultural population will progressively intensify its agricultural production and land tenure system in a step-like manner. As an existing tenure system proves insufficient under pressure it expands spatially, intensifies without adaptation (e.g. fallows are shortened), depletes the soil, declines steeply in yields and is ultimately replaced with an adapted, more intensive system better able to meet villagers' needs. At each 'graduation' (adaptation) of the tenure system more food is produced in absolute terms, but less is produced for the time and energy invested (see Barlette 1976 for a case study).

As the agricultural population comes under increasing pressure it is assumed that pressure will force innovation and a new, more intensive tenure system will be adopted, one that can produce greater yields from the depleted soil. The new tenure system would be more efficient than the original over infertile soils, but less efficient over fertile soils. Hence, graduating is thought to be undesirable for the cultivators; graduation is more a necessity than a choice.



Evidence of such an induced tenure transformation in Fiji already exists. Ward (1994) observed changes when cash cropping is infused into the 'traditional' tenure system. Gardeners spread outwards from the village to steeper and more marginal lands, fallow periods are shortened and production is intensified within the confines of the present tenure system. Not only this, but fertility, productivity and food security under this pressurised tenure system regularly decline as the workload increases. The subsistence village of Nairukuruku may suffer a similar outcome to the extent that food crops are cultivated at inefficient distances from the village. Indeed, Overall illustrates for the subsistence village of Nakorovou that when population growth reduced the land base relative to the population, fallow periods also shortened such that:

When cassava first appeared in Nakorovou [circa 1930], villagers planted a variety which required only three months to mature. It was named *vula tolu* ('three month' or 'three moon') for this property . . . The land is no longer rich enough for this type of cassava to mature within three months. *Vula tolu* now requires a year to grow, villagers say. (1993:64)

With this knowledge, the following implications are presented for Nairukuruku and surrounding area. First, as supported by the present findings, under population pressure the present tenure system will expand outwards, away from the village and towards the remaining pockets of land controlled by well-endowed mataqali—'outside the village', 'across the river' or 'up the road' as it was called. This will reinforce communal values by making reciprocal practices such as sevusevu even more important for the maintenance of good standing between landowning and land-using mataqali. Thus, on the possibility that 'going outside the village' reinforces 'communality' overall (or that communality is maintained while villagers 'go outside the village'), communality and its associated tenure system will be sustained as the spatial expansion of the present tenure system reaches the practical geographical limits of available land.

Then, as pressure from population or other footprint enlarging factors (e.g. increased material desires) continues to mount during and after the spatial limits of production are reached, cultivation will intensify within the norms of the present tenure system even more than it has to this point, soil fertility will



decline further and ultimately, a decision will have to be made on whether to maintain the mataqali system of land tenure or to adopt one that is more productive. Already in Nakorosule, arguably the village under the heaviest population burden in the region, Ravuvu notes:

Unless the villagers reorganise themselves into large production units and make effective use of their labour, or of more appropriate technology, it is unlikely that home and market demands for locally produced food crops will be contained. This also depends upon the availability of adequate suitable areas for gardening. (1988:142)

Due to the interconnectedness between land tenure and rural Fijian social organisation, such a decision is akin to deciding whether to maintain the 'traditional' culture as it is today or to opt for another system of social and economic organisation.

As land becomes ever scarcer, and hence as more personal investment in the land is required for productivity, landowners will in all likelihood seek to secure their 'ownership' of the land. This runs counter to the principles of communality, as well as counter to the hypothesis of the present study: that land scarcity reinforces 'communality'. Yet it seems that communality may only increase alongside scarcity to a point and once this point is reached, the trend is reversed and individual claims to land predominate. In Nakorovou, Overall (1993) documents this tendency and the way it has led to further intensification and individual ownership as productive improvements are made over the land.

Concluding warnings

Thus the possibility of this 'pressured' tenure shift can be said to exist. Indeed, it is already occurring. In the name of caution it should be confronted now, without the romantic air normally surrounding discussion of 'tradition'. It should be remembered that, contrary to Boserup's (1965) assumption, tenurial change and intensification are *not* automatic innovations owed to population pressure. Africa's failures to feed itself are poignant examples that there are many other factors to be managed (Soto 2000). Overall (1993) observes that rural to urban migration can delay Boserup's (1965) presupposed agricultural evolution by alleviating population pressure, but the potential for this is limited



in Fiji. It must be remembered that innovation is less the automatic product of pressures and more the outcome of deliberate, concerted effort for specific change.

Signs are that some Fijians are at least conscious of what the future may demand. In his closing words the Ratu states, *'Fijians still think of the big picture, they still think of the common good'* yet *'we're coming to the end of this mentality, and the main reason is the lack of land'*. The question is whether mere consciousness is enough, or if there will first have to be pangs of inadequacy before there is a large-scale transformation of the tenure system in Fiji.

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Notes

- ¹ The decline in formal leases under the Native Land Trust Board system can also be attributed to a discontentedness among the native Fijians with the land rent rates, the rent distribution scheme and the loss of control over the land usage (Overton 1987).
- ² High-resolution digital photographs of landscape and gardens are available from the author upon request.
- ³ Or 244 villagers x 0.3 acres required per head x [(7 years fallow x 3/5 weighting) + (15 years fallow x 2/5 weighting)] = 750 acres required in total for the village. Weightings for fallow periods are based on surveys by author.
- ⁴ This figure is difficult to define. Lands devoted to commercial activities tend to be the best lands, devoted on a long-term or permanent basis, i.e. with little to no fallows, while subsistence cultivation is pushed back over more distant and less productive lands where fallow periods *should be* longest but are often not, due to the pressures upon them.
- ⁵ Specifically, Vuniduba village, Navunidakau village and Nakorovatu village (none of which is enumerated in official censuses).
- ⁶ Specifically, Matailobau tikina, Wainimala tikina, Waimaro tikina and Lomaivuna tikina, as observed in official censuses reports from 1956 to 1996.

⁷ The (Fijianised Christian) names are all pseudonyms. Vunivalu roughly means 'chief', as does the term Ratu. Vunivalu implies a degree of paramountcy. Ravuvu (1988:99) notes *Vunivalu* as 'the highest title in the *Vanna* Waimaro'.

⁸ A galala is a villager who leaves the security of the village and, often, its traditional obligations, in order to farm independently and, most often, commercially. The galala separates himself from the village geographically as well as socially, but the separation is rarely absolute. Strictly speaking, under the old Fijian Regulation, a galala was an independent or exempted Fijian farmer who paid a commutation rate to be released from communal services (Lasaga 1984:221). The Spate Report (1959:97) advocated such a lifestyle, which indeed was officially sanctioned for some 'appropriate' individuals during the 1950s and 1960s (see Ravuvu 1988:75–6).

⁹ This seemingly represents a contradiction. To avoid reducing the discussion to the level of the individual may be to neglect the subjective. Yet still there is the argument that qualitative research is futile so long as its findings remain confined to a single person, neglecting societal trends. This research stands as a middle ground of compromise. Group interviews and a cumulative synthesis of accounts acknowledge individual subjectivity as well as the fact that the individual does not think in isolation.

¹⁰ A fuller description of the methods and their rigour can be obtained by contacting the author.

¹¹ As a subgroup of the mataqali, a tokatoka (an extended family) is considered the main production unit in the village (Spate 1959).

¹² The traditional sevusevu ceremony embodies a token gesture of presentation of *yaqona*. It is performed on various occasions for a variety of purposes, one of which is when requesting to borrow land.

¹³ A tabua (whale's tooth) traditionally is presented on all special occasions, including when requesting use of another's land.

¹⁴ The informed reader would see here parallels between 'going outside the village' and becoming a galala farmer.

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