

# Colonial Uneven Development, Fijian *Vanua*, and Modern Ecotourism in Taveuni, Fiji<sup>i</sup>

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## Introduction

This article is an attempt to situate the modern ecotourism ventures operated in the Bouma region of Taveuni today in the context of the island's history of development from the pre-colonial times and the local Fijian communities' *vanua* (land) identity. The main argument is that Bouma is a peripheral sphere, constructed by a series of events that contributed to a condition of "uneven development" (Harvey 2005:55-89; Smith 2008[1984]). The process was an intertwined history of land sale by the paramount chiefdom, establishment of large-scale plantations by foreign planters, and gazetting of nature reserves by the British colonial government from 1860 to 1914. These were further legalized by the colonial land tenure system and native policies. Although Bouma was seemingly left untouched in this history of land alienation and retained the majority of the native lands on Taveuni, the spatial dynamics of the island has been transformed and it became marginalized from the export-based plantation economy of Taveuni.

The *itaukei* (natives) of Bouma do not see their environment in terms of capitalist production values. Believing themselves as the autochthonous people of the island, they seized the growing discourse of sustainable development and established their ecotourism projects in the 90s in the hope of uplifting their *vanua* identity, on which an indigenous blueprint of development resides. In this article, while concerning the expression of *vanua* in the Bouma region as a whole, I will focus on examples from *Waitabu*, one of the four main communities in Bouma. Considered one of the two founding ancestries of Bouma (the other one is *Vidawa*), *Waitabu* now operates a marine park ecotourism venture based on a marine protected area. However, conserving the environment for them is more than just creating a tourist space. Natural resources are tied with their sense of identity and the spiritual prosperity of the village, as they reorient themselves within an environment that has been through much change.

As mentioned by Harvey in his lecture "Notes towards a theory of uneven geographical development", an important driving force of uneven development is the accumulation of natural resources through dispossession. Given that these resources are unevenly distributed, their appropriation therefore depends upon spatial strategies to gain access to and command over them (Harvey 2005:70). But the seizure of natural resources is only the beginning of the story. The survival of capitalism relies on turning resources into commodities in the most cost-effective way. This means that the different scales of territories that it occupied must be managed efficiently, in order to give way to the smooth operation of capitalist production. One of such strategies is the "production of nature." Smith defines uneven development as "the concrete process and pattern of the production of nature under capitalism" (Smith 2008:8). In this process, a complex differentiation in the relation with nature is developed. For example, nature is differentiated according to sex and class, mental and manual activities, production and distribution activities, and so on. Smith argued that a "second nature" is produced along with this process, which comprises societal institutions that facilitate and regulate the exchange of commodities. This is a nature that is defined by the quantity of exchange-value its employment will bring to the market, a commoditized nature so to speak. The first nature, which was originally thought of as the non-humanly

created wilderness, has also been altered. It is now seen as the concrete and material viewed in terms of its use-value and potentiality for further development, as opposed to a second nature that is abstract, already commoditized and calculable by its exchange-value (Smith 2008:78; Prudham and Heynen 2011). Therefore, even if a piece of land is seemingly undisturbed by commercial activity (say, agriculture), it has most possibly gone through the process of being selected, examined, and calculated under capitalist glances, and its status as a pristine nature is strategically maintained, which facilitates a more efficient disposition of resources and labor power to places that are prioritized.

The production of nature is where I would like to elaborate on the uneven development process. In Fiji, the capitalist mode of production introduced by foreign settlers, especially the ones that came after 1850 via steam powered boats, accumulated land, labor, and raw materials for its operation. They sought for maximum production in the global market, and formed new relations with the indigenous population. Gradually, it transformed a self-sufficient tribal economy to an export-based plantation economy. Cotton, copra, cocoa, and sugar industries all have had their fair share of ebbs and flows in Fiji as the small tropical colony was involved deeper into the global economic system. A new spatial arrangement was crystallized in this process (see Britton 1980; Sofer 1993). Fijian land with great commercial values was quickly alienated from indigenous communities, either by dubious transactions or violence (France 1969:41). These alienated lands were soon materialized into large plantations, estates, townships, even commodities. Communities that occupy undesirable lands were then assigned as wilderness, and kept in their “natural states.”

This uneven development process was further strengthened by the British colonial land tenure system and native policies. The first official colonial governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon who arrived in 1875, was determined that indigenous Fijians should be separated from the Western influence in order to preserve its culture and tradition. He introduced Indian indentured laborers to Fiji in 1879. They were assigned to the role as “workers” on the plantation whereas indigenous Fijians were constructed as landowning kinship groups (*mataqali*) that should be protected in their “natural environment.” Lands that the *mataqali* claimed to own were then legalized as inalienable property and Indian laborers were restricted from the ownership of land and could only lease it from the government or Fijian landowners. This land policy became traditionalized as *vakavanua* (the way of the land) and is seen as part of Fiji’s custom today, in contrast to “the way of money” associated with Europeans and Indian laborers (Jolly 1992).

This colonial legacy has tremendous implication to the post-colonial development process in Fiji. Approaching its independent status in 1970, Fiji’s economy is also striving to be restructured into a more independent and matured system. The rural Fijians who had been “trapped” on their land for almost a century thus became the subject of scrutiny. Watters (1969), for example, suggested that there was a form of development continuum across rural Fijian villages. At one extreme there were very traditional villages that remained isolated and were still dominated by subsistence production and clung to communal modes of production. At the other pole there were the “modern” villages that engaged heavily in cash cropping, had higher standard of living, and were characterized by numbers of individual farmers (*galala*) who were not bound by the kinship landowning group boundaries. Spate (1959, quoted in Brookfield 1988b) also supports the individualization of access of land. He argues that “for the Fijian countryside the objective should be a community of independent farmers, living and working on holdings heritable and alienable at least between Fijians.” The point is that labor forces should be freed from the communal obligations and used in a much more productive way on resource-based development schemes. The Great Council of Chiefs in Fiji

(also a colonial invention) strongly opposed to this suggestion, stating that *mataqali* should continue to be the landowning social unit and the present system of Fijian land tenure should be rigidly maintained (Brookfield 1988b:18).

After independence, Fiji's national economy gradually went in another direction. While the sugar industry remains the pillar of Fiji's economy, tourism has excelled in 1999 and became the single largest industry in Fiji, earning around \$558 million US dollars, contributing to 16% of the GDP and providing employment to an estimated 40,000 people in Fiji (United Nations 2003:12). Initially the tourism boom only impacted well-developed alienated lands where international entrepreneurs or companies have invested in infrastructures and tourist facilities. However, since the mid-1980s a discourse of sustainable development has emerged in Fiji with a focus on nature-based tourism in rural areas. Given that approximately 83% of the natural resources in Fiji are held under communal ownership by indigenous Fijians (Weaver and King 1996), it is argued that this brand of tourism, now called ecotourism, could provide an answer to the rural development dilemma in Fiji (Korth 2000:262). These projects aim to not only provide supplementary income to the subsistence economy of the communities, but also establish a better resource management regime. In turn, community members will actively protect the environment due to the monetary incentives generated by these projects.

In this article, I will demonstrate that these "disadvantaged" rural areas and their natural environments have a colonial legacy, which has seldom been addressed in the policy-making process. Furthermore, the modern ecotourism projects that are designed to salvage rural poverty do not exist in a neutral site, but a space that can trace its lineage back to colonial encounters. At the same time, as I will demonstrate, local communities are not passive recipients of these universal values such as "sustainable development" and "environmentalism." As Tsing has noted, global powers do not operate as a well-oiled machine, but are engaged with local desires and visions (Tsing 2005). In Bouma, Taveuni, the idea of *vanua* that connects people with the environment still actively play an important role in the management of natural resources, as well as how people envision modern ecotourism projects.

### **Tracing Uneven Development in Taveuni**

Taveuni is the third largest island in the Fiji archipelago (437 km<sup>2</sup>) and is known as the "Garden Island" because of its fertile volcanic soil and export agricultural products such as *dalo* (taro, *Colocasia esculenta*) and *yaqona* (kava, *Piper methysticum*). It is estimated that Taveuni contributes to more than 70% of the profit from the taro export industry in Fiji annually since the 90s (McGregor et al. 2011:13). It is also famous for the availability of freehold land on the island. Estates and properties are advertised to be sold frequently<sup>ii</sup>. According to the latest census, the population of Taveuni is 14,216. Among them 11,101 are indigenous Fijians (Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics 2007) who came to settle on the island via different migration routes (Frost 1974; Sayes 1982).

However, Taveuni as a freehold paradise was only a late development. In the beginning it was actually one of the most pristine, unexplored places in Fiji. The image of Taveuni as a tropical Eden can be traced back to writings from early European visitors to the island. In his classic account of Fijian culture and environment, Fijian and the Fijians, the Wesleyan missionary Thomas Williams made the following description of Taveuni based on the experience of his stay from 1843 to 1847:

However wild and terrible the appearance of the island once was, it

is now covered with luxuriance and beauty beyond the conception of the most glowing imagination. Perhaps every characteristic of Fijian scenery is found on Somosomo [Taveuni], while all the tropical vegetables are produced here in perfection (Williams 1858:6).

On May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1860, the German-born, Britain-educated botanist Berthold Seemann made similar observation on Taveuni upon his arrival:

The trees and bushes are very thick, and everywhere overgrown by white, blue and pink convolvulus and other creepers, often entwined in graceful festoons. Here and there the eye descries cleared patches of cultivation, or low brushwood, overtopped by the feathery crowns of magnificent tree-ferns; villages nestling among them. The air is laden with moisture, and there is scarcely a day without a shower of rain. The north-western side of the island being moreover, from its geographical position, deprived of the direct action of the trade wind, the temperature feels warm when in other parts of the group it is comparatively cool. In consequence of this, few whites have taken up their residence in Taviuni [Taveuni]...(Seemann 1862:20).

As we can see, Taveuni was described as a tropical paradise almost untouched by European intruders at least before 1860. In fact, no record indicates that any European trader has resided there for more than a day or two before the 1830s (Bedford 1978:107). This is to be compared with other places in Fiji notably Bua Bay, *Vanua Levu* and parts of the main island Viti Levu where some European traders had already settled permanently in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the sandalwood trade. The *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumber) trade which began in 1822 has also created intensive interaction between indigenous Fijians and Europeans in various *bêche-de-mer* stations in Viti Levu and *Vanua Levu*. This also has a profound impact to the environment: it is estimated that in the period 1827-35 well over 500,000 cubic feet of stacked firewood must have been burnt by the traders for boiling and drying process of *bêche-de-mer* in Fiji (Ward 1972:118). None of this had happened in Taveuni before 1860.

In July 1839 the first long-term European residents, the Wesleyan missionaries John Hunt and Richard Lyth and both of their families, arrived to establish a mission station in Somosomo, the settlement for the paramount chief of the Cakaudrove confederacy, Tui Cakau, in Taveuni. This effort came to an end in 1847 when the decision of closing the station was made due to lack of progress in missionization and the constant obstruction from the chiefs of Cakaudrove. From then on until 1860 Taveuni saw only sporadic European visitors (including a failed attempt to establish a mission station in Somosomo from the Roman Catholics in 1851) even though the Fiji archipelago had well marched into the contact period (see Crispin 2009, Thornley 2000 for Catholic and Methodist missionary history on Taveuni).

It is a different story, however, after 1862 when Tui Cakau Ratu Golea defeated the Tongan invaders in Taveuni. Two consequences followed after the war: 1. The Roman Catholic church who supported Tui Cakau against the Wesleyan Tongans established its lasting settlement at Wairiki, a settlement close to Somosomo. 2. Large areas of land started

to be sold to European planters by Tui Cakau either as retribution because they were the land of “rebels” who sided with the Tongans or simply for western goods and wealth (Ward 2002). Outer isles such as Kanacea, Laucala, Naitauba, and Rabi were sold respectively around this time, creating many displaced Fijian communities<sup>iii</sup>. Afterwards when the reputation of Taveuni’s rich volcanic soils spread out, coupled with high prices for cotton due to the American Civil War, many European settlers were attracted to the island to establish their large plantations and estates. The land alienation process was so rapid that Brookfield concluded that in the 1870s “Taveuni was no longer a Fijian Island except in name” (Brookfield 1978:33).

One of the most prominent planters in Taveuni was the Englishman James Valentine Tarte who accumulated several blocks of land (20 km<sup>2</sup> in total) in Vuna, southern Taveuni in 1871. In the *Cyclopedia of Fiji* in 1907, there were vivid descriptions of how Tarte developed his Vuna estates: he brought cattle from New Zealand, raised horses, built steel rails with portable trams, engaged in copra business (*Cyclopedia of Fiji* 1907:290-291). To this day the fifth generation of the Tarte family is still very active in these estates, engaging in a variety of projects such as tourism, biofuel and virgin coconut oil. Another important figure behind the rapid alienation of land in Taveuni is a British planter called John Bates Thurston, who later on became the 5<sup>th</sup> Governor of Fiji. Thurston arrived in Taveuni in June 1865 and soon became a consul for Tui Cakau. Not only did he divide up blocks of land for sale to European planters, he also acquired the best piece of land himself in eastern Taveuni from Tui Cakau for £130 in July 1867, on which he planted cotton (Scarr 1973:117). It was an alluvial peninsula with the river Waibula running through, just north of the Bouma region, and was considered by the people in *Waitabu* and *Vidawa* part of their ancestral territory. As his estate developed gradually, it became the largest single alienated block in Taveuni (around 12 km<sup>2</sup>).

As noted by R. Gerard Ward (1965), after the Cession in 1874, to the dismay of most planters, the governor Arthur Gordon vowed to preserve indigenous Fijian culture and land and soon formed a Land Claims Commission to determine titles and ownerships of land. The very first hearing was held in Taveuni in 1875, possibly due to the messy land alienation situation it presented. However, few claims were disallowed. It has been pointed out that even though indigenous Fijians still hold the majority of the land in Fiji today (around 83%), foreigners had acquired the most productive parts along the coast of Viti Levu and *Vanua Levu* before the 1870s (Ward 1969). In the case of Taveuni, the flat alluvial and the most fertile parts of the island, notably the south, central-west, and north, were soon acquired by European planters. These planters drastically altered the landscapes of these areas and changed the spatial dynamics of the island. Initially they tried cotton. When the cotton boom was over in 1871, some of them experimented with growing coffee for a while. Others who owned land in the leeward dry side of island tried sugar cane plantation. After both ventures failed, copra became their main focus. As Tarte recalled, knowing the profit that the copra business would eventually make, he kept purchasing land and expanding his territory to grow coconuts. Almost all of his estates in Vuna were cleared and planted with coconut seeds (Brookfield 1978:33). The same situation also happened in the estates in the north and central-west. In 1950, it is estimated that around 80 km<sup>2</sup> of land was planted with coconuts in Taveuni, in which more than three quarters were planted in estates (Ward 1965:156-157). With the likes of Tarte, south-west Taveuni soon became the most developed region on the island in terms of infrastructure. In the early 1870s a small township was established at Vuna Point. There were even a shop and a small hotel in the mid-1870s. Steamers could arrive directly from the capital Suva to collect copra gathered by the estates. Roads and tracks into the central mountain were built along the western coast.

After the 1920s, there was a trend of subdivision of these large estates. This was

mostly due to the termination of Indian indenture laborers in 1920 and many estate owners would subdivide their land to either sell or lease it to their Indian workers in hope that they would remain on the land (Brookfield 1988b). The consequence was that land became commodities that changed hands frequently. This process accelerated after WWII. Most of the buyers were large company owners (i.e. Morris Hedstrom, Burns Philip, Malcom Forbes) who sought land to diversify their business and built shops, hotels, even private airstrips (Brookfield 1978:44). Again, these were mostly centered on the western side of Taveuni where many blocks of freehold land were available. As tourism became a viable plan for the economic development of Taveuni after the 1970s, it is expected that the facilities on these land can generate employment and boost urban development in semi-townships like Naqara and Matei. Today, these places are where the hotels, resorts, and luxurious residential areas are located. The only native region on Taveuni that has not gone through rapid land loss is Bouma located in the rugged east, where the majority of the tribal territory was kept intact. The Vuna people were forced to settle further south due to land alienation, along with people migrated from Kanacea whose land was sold by Tui Cakau in 1863. The lands of other major chiefly villages such as Somosomo, Welagi, and Naselesele, were all fragmented into different blocks after the 1860s (Brookfield 1988a:115-116).

But due to this new spatial dynamics of the island, Bouma was marginalized in colonial development planning. No proper road was constructed to Bouma until the late 70s, which is vital for the transportation of copra and other cash crops (Great Britain Colonial Office 1964:83). Then with the declaration of nature reserves to the central mountain and coastal area adjacent to Bouma, the whole central-east region of Taveuni was categorized into a large piece of hinterland. In 1913, the Forest Ordinance was passed in the colonial Legislative Council for the proclamation of forest reserves in Fiji, which immediately covered the river bank mangrove area outside of the capital Suva and Namuka Harbor in Viti Levu. In the following year, the 112-km<sup>2</sup> mountainous area in central Taveuni was proclaimed as Forest Reserve, the first and largest mountain forest reserve in Fiji (Waqaisavou 1999). A 40-km<sup>2</sup> coastal area adjacent and south of Bouma known as Ravilevu was also acquired by the Crown for reservation purposes in 1912 and proclaimed as a Nature Reserve in 1959 (Great Britain Colonial Office 1959:37). While the architect behind the establishment of these large reserves (which consist of more than 35% of Taveuni's total land area) was never specified in colonial documents, I speculate that it was probably the result of suggestions given from the visiting botanist John Horne. In 1877 he was invited by Governor Gordon to Fiji to examine the native flora. He spent some time in Taveuni and was very impressed with the island's fertility. Serving as the director of the Botanic Garden in Mauritius, a place where pioneering colonial forest protection programs thrived (Grove 1996:145), Horne made the following observation:

This is a very fertile island, and capable of producing large quantities of sugar, coffee, and cocoa-nuts. There are considerable numbers of the latter, but there is room for twice as many ... The area of the island is computed at about 217 square miles, of which about 45 near the coast could be planted with cocoa-nuts, 45 with sugar cane, and 45 with coffee, leaving 82 square miles for forest reserves and waste land (Horne 1881:54).

Two soil specialists Twyford and Wright also made similar comments after conducting a nation-wide field survey in Fiji in the 1960s:

Taveuni is, without doubt, an island of great agricultural potential. There are no pedological reasons why the island could not become an intensively cropped area ... Only the very steepest and wettest areas need to be reserved for protective forest, provided of course, agricultural development is not so irresponsible that it leads, for example, to severe soil erosion (Twyford & Wright 1965:401).

In his proposal for a Forest Ordinance in Fiji, Horne states that the establishment of forest reserves is “for climate reasons, and for keeping an abundant supply of water in streams” (Horne 1881:214). This is especially true in Taveuni for most of the communities rely on permanent streams and rivers flowing from the central mountain with well-forested catchments. However, it is also clear that in the grand scheme of spatial development in Taveuni, the western side where the major plantations were located had potential for further development, while the steep and wet eastern side should be reserved.

Fijians were prohibited to use the nature reserves initially and nothing was ever done with the forests. But unlike forest conservation programs implemented elsewhere in the British colonies (notably India) that were met by resistance movements, there wasn't any struggle against such establishments. Part of the reason may be due to the fact that the area was generally on high-altitude mountains that were never cultivated intensively by local communities. Although Bouma people trace back their ancestries inside the mountains, they had already relocated to the coastal area in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, this is not to say that the massive Forest Reserve area is not vital to their livelihood. As Grove warned us, peasant's ability to exploit marginal, non-arable land and forest should not be neglected for this is precisely why conflicts arose when colonial conservation programs turned these areas into reserves (Grove 1990). After the *yaqona* economy boomed through the 1970s and the taro export economy flourished after 1994 in Taveuni, many sectors of the Forest Reserve were cultivated by Fijian communities. This shows that the mountain area still can be utilized provided there were proper development plans. This also reflects another issue that contributes to the underdevelopment of the Bouma Region: the unequal and irrational distribution of land suitable for crop cultivation<sup>iv</sup>. For example, although almost 600 acres of land was allocated to the *mataqali* (lineage) of *Waitabu* in the land survey by the Native Lands Commission in 1934, most of them are steep and mountainous land with moderate to low soil fertility. The most productive farmer in *Waitabu* can have 3000-5000 taros in his garden at a given time, while the number in the southern lowlands is ten times that. Moreover, there are no proper tracks into these mountainous areas. The current manager of Thurston's estate (now called Vunivasa) who works for a produce export company told me that *Waitabu* villagers always see the place as part of their traditional territory and wanted it back. Once he asked a *Waitabu* elder why they need the land since they have more than enough themselves, he replied that the land of Vunivasa is more developed with tracks leading to the mountain whereas theirs are more difficult to farm.

With regards to the native lands, under the Native Regulations introduced just after the Cession, Fijian labor could not be recruited without the permission of local officials (namely chiefs). Fijians were required, by regulation from the 1870s, to meet communal labor obligations in their villages, and to provide labor and produce for their chiefs (Bedford 1988:58). However, the indigenous Fijian population in Taveuni wasn't much to begin with from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Taveuni is a prime example of an island in eastern Fiji which could be classified as “under-populated” (Bedford 1978:92). In the year 1881 when the first census was taken, there were only 1706 indigenous Fijians on the island. In the 1936 census there

had not been much improvement in which only 1775 were counted. Elders in *Waitabu* still remember that there were only 4-5 houses in the village in the early 1950s. Before the cession, most of the laborers working on plantations on Taveuni were “Polynesians” recruited from the New Hebrides and the Gilbert Islands from 1864 (and later on from the Solomon Islands). At the time of the 1881 census, there were over 1000 “Polynesians” on Taveuni. After 1879 the number of Indian population in Taveuni also rose from 500+ in 1896 to 1551 in 1956. Those two groups of people are the only wage laborers in Taveuni at least before the 1920s. After the Second World War was over, with the recovery of the copra price, Taveuni’s plantation economy flourished again. However, Taveuni’s own Fijian population could not provide a sufficient labor force to these plantations. As a result, many Fijians from outside of Taveuni were recruited. In the 1956 census the indigenous Fijian population doubled to 3751, which was mostly attributed to migrants. It was reported that in the 1950s Taveuni had the highest proportion of “strangers” in its population (Bedford 1978:96). These people then established various settlements, formed kinship relationships with the *mataqali* land owners and leased lands from them. Today, they have become the most economically flexible communities in Taveuni, engaging in different investments and forming business relationships with Indo-Fijians and Europeans.

Overall, what I wish to demonstrate in this simplified history of Taveuni is that the environment and spatial relations on the island that we see today are constructed by a process of land alienation initiated by foreign planters. The selection of alienated land involved a capitalist glance that calculates which spaces are suitable for production and those that did not fit the scheme were soon categorized as either native or nature by colonial policies. Bouma, the region that retains most of the native lands, therefore does not own an untouched space or an immaculate *vanua*. These lands were already part of the process of the production of nature. In the second half of the article I argue that when the Bouma people are trying to use modern ecotourism projects to pick up where colonial development had left off; they are not categorizing the environment in capitalist terms. The *vanua* they see is still bounded with custom and obligation, even when they are engaged in modern business projects.

### ***Vanua Bouma and Vanua Development***

*Vanua* is a powerful indigenous Fijian concept which is commonly translated into English as ‘land’ but consists of many different dimensions and multiple meanings. Physically it refers to not just the land, but also the flora, fauna and people living on it. It can also extend to the sea and coastal territories. Symbolically, it is a way of life, a set of beliefs, knowledge and cultural protocol passed down through generations, as exemplified by the Fijian word *vakavanua* (‘the way of the Fijian people’ or ‘matters of the land’, see Nayacakalou 2001[1975]; Overton 1999; Ravuvu 1983). Structurally, it denotes the place that a social organization (or a set of social organizations) settles on and from which memberships, rights, and titles are derived, as illustrated by the Fijian chiefly hierarchy and land tenure system. It is also argued that *vanua* has gone through certain transformation and reinvention by Christianization (Ryle 2010; Tomlinson 2009; Tuwere 2002) and colonialism (Clammer 1973; France 1969; Ward 1995). Here I will treat *vanua* as an indigenous Fijian group identity. This is an identity not simply passed down through generations, but is performed and acted out in places and real life circumstances (Poyer and Linnekin 1990:8). For example, Ryle noticed that after the 2000 coup in Fiji, *lotu* (Christianity) has been emphasized in the discourse of *vanua* for indigenous Fijians to distinguish themselves with Indo-Fijians (Ryle 2005). It is also deeply rooted in the living environment, and as landscapes

can be made and remade, so does the *vanua* identity.

The Bouma region has four major communities: *Waitabu*, *Vidawa*, Korovou (the capital village of Bouma where the chief Vunisa sits) and Lavena, with a population around 1000 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2007). The people of *Waitabu* and *Vidawa* consider themselves the autochthon of Taveuni, while people of Korovou and Lavena came later via different migration routes. Archaeological data shows that the earliest hill fortifications built on the central mountain were constructed around A.D. 1200 (Frost 1974). Some of these fortifications are considered constructed by the ancestors of the people of *Waitabu* and *Vidawa*, who sometimes still refer themselves as *kai lekutu*, (forest people). The hill forts might be the result of a state of warring confederations and village-states which continued into early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Hocart's early research on the northern states of Fiji, he identified three principal states active in Taveuni and small outlying islands in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: Vuna in the southern lowlands, Wainikeli in the north, and the sea-state of Laucala (Hocart 1952). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the i-Sokula people originated from *Vanua* Levu moved into Taveuni and settled in Somosomo. They built a powerful chiefdom - Cakaudrove - under the paramount chief Tui Cakau and conquered Taveuni-proper, forming tributary and kinship relationships with minor village-states. Even as late as 1840, the Wesleyan missionaries Hunt and Lyth still recorded a full-scale assault from Cakaudrove on Vuna when the latter formed alliance with Bau, another powerful chiefdom in Viti Levu (Crosby 1994).

Unlike Vuna, Bouma never gave Cakaudrove much trouble. According to oral history, Bouma and Somosomo people were interrelated through marriage alliance and the former was one of the tributary states of the Cakaudrove confederacy (Sayes 1982). As the British colonial government took over Fiji, the administrators divided Fiji into 14 *Yasana* (provinces) and each of those into a number of *Tikina* (districts). Under *Tikina* there is *Vanua*, and then the *Yavusa* (clan), which generally conforms to the territory of a single village and is usually headed by a chief. The chief inherits his authority from the chiefly lineage which is one of the several *mataqali* (lineage) under *yavusa*. Each *mataqali* also has its own territory to farming or use as a burial site within the village. This structure was hierarchically ordered and was supposed to be based on migration histories and genealogies collected by colonial officials.

Under this ideology, the four villages of Bouma were grouped into *Vanua* Bouma, which is under the authority of *Tikina* Wainikeli and finally *Yasana* Cakaudrove. However, in local oral histories, the people of Bouma consider themselves the true owner of the land in Taveuni. An one elder in *Vidawa* told me:

As I know, the story of our ancestors, they said that Taveuni were divided into only two parts. One belongs to Tui Vuna. One belongs to the Bouma people and Tui Lekutu. If you go pass Waiyevo, you come to a place where the boat anchors...they call that place Naiyalayala estate ... that's a boundary for the Bouma people. From there to the other side [north] is the Bouma people ... and from Naiyalayala estate...go south...that belongs to the Vuna people and Tui Vuna ... I think they came together [Tui Vuna and Tui Lekutu] and divided the land (Sake, field interview, my translation).

This sense of history is also retold by several other storytellers in Bouma and feeds well into Bouma people's autonomous *vanua* identity, regardless that they are now placed under the regional hierarchy constructed by colonialism. There are also a lot of physical manifestations of their *vanua* identity in the living environment. Bouma is often called

*salauca* (the way of the rain). Legend has it that the Fijian gods (*kalou-vu*) have given rain to the ancestors of Bouma. Therefore, whenever Bouma people gathered, it will rain and they will often see it as a blessing. When they attend a meeting outside of Bouma, it is said that the rain will follow them. Many witnessed this magical phenomenon during a Great Council of Chiefs meeting in Somosomo years ago.

Forest is also an important image of their *vanua*. As mentioned earlier, people of *Vidawa* and *Waitabu* were originated from the inland forest. The first settlement of *Vidawa* people is called Navuga, located in the central mountain with fortified remains still visible. The vuga is the *Metrosideros polymorpha*, a native tree in the Pacific and is perfect building material. The chiefly *mataqali* of *Waitabu* is called Vunivesi, that is, the *Intsia bijuga*, often used for constructing canoes. Moreover, the root for the word Bouma is *bou*, which is the great kingpost of a traditional Fijian gathering house, while the *yavusa* title of *Waitabu* is Naisaqai in which *saqai* means the crossbeam that holds the thatched roof of the house. Elders in *Waitabu* told me that in the olden days when constructing the chiefly house in Bouma, it was customary for the *Waitabu* people to come and build the roof. These words show that not only *vanua* identity is very much connected to the environment, but also the customary affiliations and obligations are a crucial part of its formation.

The Bouma *vanua* identity is also manifested in their language. During 1985 two social linguists came to Bouma and stayed in *Waitabu* to study their language, which they call *Na Vosa Va'abouma* (Dixon 1988; Schmidt 1988). This language, marked by glottal stops replacing the k sound in standard Fijian language and a unique set of lexicons, is said to be only used in Bouma, not even other places in Taveuni. I was sometimes warned by villagers not to use standard Fijian when talking to elders with high status in Bouma. As Dixon observed, “[the language of Bouma] does...retain a definite set of distinctive dialectal features, which [Bouma] people are proud to recognize as diagnostic of their mode of speech. There is little likelihood of the [Bouma] dialect being lost in the foreseeable future” (Dixon 1988:4).

This strong sense of *vanua* allows them to situate development differently. When referring to development, Bouma people sometimes use the term *vakatorocaketaki na vanua*, which literally means “uplift the land.” They seek for monetary income, improvement of household and village living conditions, but they also stress the significance of sharing among kinfolks, offering to the Church, and maintaining harmony on the *vanua*. There were sporadic development schemes created by the government to boost rural productivity in Bouma. After the 1960s land subdivision plans were approved to allocated small blocks of farms from the *mataqali* land for individual commercial farmers. However, most of such blocks are now either abandoned or returned back to the *mataqali*. It is argued that individual farmers would rather go back to the greater security of the village economy and its system of support (Brookfield 1988b:127).

Today only few farmers in Bouma can be categorized as commercial farmers, while most of them engage in *dalo* and *yaqona* subsistence farming on their *mataqali* land. While doing fieldwork in *Waitabu*, I encountered this farming scheme. They organized a Four-day-a-week planting plan which specified that farmers should plant a certain amount of *dalo* and *yaqona* in each working day for the *vanua*. The profit from those *vanua* plantings should in turn be collected for the village as a whole. Also, the only non-farming day Friday was designated as *cakacaka ni vanua* (*vanua* working day), on which farmers should be helping affairs in the village, or the Bouma region. This demonstrates what Crosby terms “*vanua* development”: “a harmonious concept of environmental, social, and economic well-being that includes an essential respect for tradition” (Crosby 2002). From a group identity

perspective, this also means that members of a community should constantly confirm their membership to the *vanua* by performing obligations or presenting offerings (in the form of money or crops).

### **The Waitabu Marine Park and the Reestablishment of Vanua**

*Waitabu* is a small coastal community with a population around 120 with 27 households. It is the northernmost village of Bouma and is immediately adjacent to Coubrough estate, a small piece of freehold land alienated in the 1870s. Villagers practice small-scale subsistence fishing and root crop farming. Only one elder, who served in Fiji Army, has a regular but modest salary. All households depend on income from selling *dalo* and *yaqona* by the adult male members, which is very unstable.

In 1988 the people of Bouma were asked by the current Tui Cakau and his cousin at the Provincial Office to participate in a Korean logging project. Initially the Bouma people were attracted by the promised benefits of land rentals and employment, but felt bullied by the Somosomo chiefs and concerned about the environment for future generations (Crosby 2002). Some of them who were aware of the sustainable development movement beginning in Fiji decided to approach the Native Lands Trust Board (NLTB) for their assistance to initiate a program that can protect their forest, provide tourism opportunities, and most importantly conserve their cultural heritage that is rooted in the forest. In November 1990 with funding from the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency (NZODA) and management assistance from Fiji's Forestry Department, the Bouma National Heritage Park officially opened. The first two projects were Korovou's Tavoro Waterfall which had already been operating in 1988, and Lavena's Coastal Walk in 1993 which takes tourists into the Ravilevu nature reserve. After initial turmoil due to different management bodies from the top, the projects moved towards a more "bottom-up" approach with a strong emphasis on local decision making (Farrelly 2011).

Before Bouma National Heritage Park began, it was agreed that all four villages in *Vanua* Bouma would have their own project. *Waitabu* soon came up with the idea of taking tourists to snorkel in the tropical reef outside of the village. In 1997, with the help from New Zealand's Tourism Resource Consultants (TRC), a marine biologist Helen Sykes was invited to *Waitabu* to do a survey. She soon found out that the reef ecosystem has been damaged badly by subsistence fishing activities. "There was nothing ... There was no fish bigger than the butterfly fish. There were no invertebrates," she told me in an interview. Under the insistence from the villagers, she came over for the second time for a longer survey and again gave a negative report. But they were really committed to having a project for themselves so she came for the third time. During this survey she was able to see many encouraging areas as well as potentials and finally gave her approval – with the prerequisite that a marine reserve should be formed. The first manager of the *Waitabu* Marine Park, the late Sala Apao, often recited this story as a biblical event similar to Peter denying Christ three times. This is a significant story for that *Waitabu* is a devout Catholic village and this demonstrated their faith in having a project for their *vanua*.

In April 1998, a Marine Protected Area (MPA) was established outside *Waitabu*, which was one of the first community-managed MPAs in Fiji. The MPA is 1100-metre long along the coastline; extended from the reef flat to the open water of the deep ocean. Within this restricted (*tabu*) area, fishing activities and reef stepping are prohibited at all times. At the same time, NGO workers also held educational workshops and worked with villagers about natural resource conservation, business management, and snorkeling guides training. The goal is not only to conserve the reef ecosystem for tourism and revive fish stocks for

subsistence usage, the project also allows *Waitabu* villagers to fully own and operate the project for themselves and the future generations. It should be noted that due to the 2000 coup, New Zealand had withdrawn their funding from Fiji and *Waitabu* Marine Park was left on its own financially for a while. With the help from Sykes and other individuals, *Waitabu* held their ground during this crisis and after three years of protection, re-growth of fish population in the MPA started to be seen in subsequent surveys. In March, 2001 the first group of tourists was taken to the snorkeling area and the ecotourism business officially began.

From a business standpoint, the performance of *Waitabu*'s ecotourism project is not as great as the NGO workers expected it to be.<sup>v</sup> The income from the project was never a reliable source to be shared among individual households. Neither was there a constant source of funding provided by the government, NGOs, or international aid agencies. Most of the time villagers have to operate by their own resources without significant financial rewards. It was decided that most of the entry fees paid by tourists should be saved in the bank to pay for tuitions of *Waitabu* primary school students. The rest was generally spent on boat fuel and equipment maintenance. Biologically, however, the outcome of over 10 years of conservation is prominent. Despite some poaching incidents, the MPA is generally respected by coastal communities. Significant fish yields in adjacent fishing grounds created by the spillover effect were also reported. Young people in the village, both male and female, actively participated in the annual reef check survey led by Sykes, and after the data is accumulated, they would report the result to all the villagers in a formal gathering. For example, they proudly presented that there was significant repopulation of invertebrates inside the MPA in the 2011 survey. The giant clam (*vasua*) that could not be seen in the first survey in 1997 now has numbered 73. This is a testament of *Waitabu*'s commitment to conservation for they are able to resist the economic value of giant clams, which has been sold as ornaments in Fiji or involved in the global aquarium trade.

But given that there was only small-scale subsistence fishing in the region, why did fish depletion happen in the first place? In interviews with village elders, they ascribe this to the lack of respect to the *vanua*. Traditional fishing methods such as *yavi rau* (Over 50 people using a large fishing net made by vines and coconut palm leaves and driving fish towards the inshore area) and *duva* plant (*Derris trifoliata*, used for fish poisoning) were practiced by locals before, but only in a reserved manner. It is said that what really worsened the situation was the advent of a seafood company in the early 80s. They paid young local fishermen to catch large amounts of marine resources, especially lobsters, without constraint. This was when night fishing started to be very popular and coral reefs were being stepped on frequently. Some elders further explain this as a "loss of tradition." They saw fishermen nowadays fail to give their first catch to the chief or the next-of-kin, just as the custom of *isevu* (offering the first harvest) is now performed lethargically. They saw people entering other villages' fishing grounds without *kerekere* (asking for permission) from the chiefs. One elder told me:

They [don't] respect the way the Fijians used to fish. When you go fishing you ask first. When you catch a fish you share. Now instead of sharing I go to the supermarket and sell it...(Sake, field interview, my translation).

This kind of cultural lament lingered even though biological surveys have shown successful results from conservation. One of such examples can be found in the *ta nuqa*

fishing practice (rabbitfish catching, *Siganus vermiculatus*). *Ta nuqa* is an important annual tradition in *Waitabu*. It takes place in mid-December when the juvenile nuqa fish starts to emerge in the sea and make their runs from north to south on the reef flat. The juvenile nuqa fish is no more than 5 cm long and comes in hundreds to thousands. According to custom, in the Bouma region only *Waitabu* is allowed to fish nuqa. The fishing group mainly consists of adult married women, mostly from other villages and married into *Waitabu*. Unlike regular fishing trips, during *ta nuqa* women must wear the formal *sulu jaba* (a long dress with bright colorful designs). In the one I observed, they gathered around 8 o'clock in the morning and had a simple breakfast together at the beach. They waited patiently and observed the travel pattern of nuqa making their runs on the shallow reef. Then, four of them form a group. Two of them spread out a small gillnet and placed it on the traveling route of the nuqa. The other two would approach behind the school of nuqa and make a special sound by vibrating their tongues, driving the fish towards the net. This continued on and off until 11 o'clock and at the end they had two big buckets filled with nuqa. Afterwards the women took the catch and gathered in front of the *matanivanua's* (the talking chief) house and began to divide it among households. Each household would send someone with a basin to retrieve their share. Nuqa can only be boiled into soup; other cooking methods such as frying are strictly forbidden. There are also other protocols and meanings:

In the olden days, during the time of *ta nuqa* there should be no noise in the village. You can't mow the lawn. You can't sing or play. Or else the nuqa will not come. The first catch should be taken to the village chief Tui Nasau's house, and then divide it over there. All the *mataqali* members will eat over there. Now this custom is no longer followed, and the first catch is taken to the *matanivanua's* house. Nuqa will not come if it is done in this way. There was one time on the *ta nuqa* day when the [last] Tui Nasau was still alive. He wore a shirt and tie with the *sulu vakataga* (formal Fijian wrap-around garment worn by men) and came to the beach. When he put one of his feet in the ocean, all the nuqa swarmed over. We caught twenty-eight bags of nuqa that day, as well as other big and small pots. The amount of nuqa was so plenty that some even spilled over on the lawn. We were also able to share them with other villages in Bouma. I will never forget that day! "(Sia, field interview, my translation).

The subtext of this narrative is that when the last Tui Nasau passed away, the succession of the title became a problem, which was being discussed constantly during my fieldwork. His eldest son took over the position without a proper installation ceremony, and left abruptly for Suva because of personal matters, leaving the chiefly seat vacant to this day. Some perceived this situation as a disorder of the *vanua*. From the oral history I gathered, *Waitabu* elders sometimes refer themselves as the Nasau people, the direct descendant of Tui Nasau, the *sau turaga* (executive chief) who accompanied Tui Lekutu to Taveuni. The title of Tui Nasau therefore is significant for *Waitabu's* own *vanua* identity, and is thought to be reflected in the environment, as exemplified by the nuqa catches. And vice versa, when the chief is absent from the *vanua*, or other *vanua* values such as sharing and respect for traditional territory are not followed, the environment will show signs of decay and deterioration, as manifested in the narrative above. For them, the goal of conservation is not simply to revive the marine ecosystem, but also to reestablish their *vanua* identity and

traditional values. Certainly the *Waitabu* people also desire monetary benefits from visitors brought by ecotourism, but as the project progressed, it is evident that they don't see it entirely as a "product" that can be marketed to generate incomes, nor is the success of conservation evaluated solely in biological terms.

### **Conclusion**

The case of the *Waitabu* Marine Park gives us an opportunity to rethink the premise of integrated conservation and development projects (ICDP), which believes that environmental conservation can be achieved through the sustainable development of economic markets that are tied with it. It is imagined that these markets would allow for the flow of cash income to people who live in biologically diverse places. In turn, these people would be motivated to conserve the biological diversity on which the markets are based (West 2006:32). The logic somewhat goes like this: the more pristine, exotic, and authentic the environment is, the more attracted it is to tourists. With tourists coming in, communities will do a better job of maintaining and guarding the environment. This perception reflects what Smith argued, the underlying values in a produced nature, which can turn the environment into commodities even though it appears as "wildlife nature", "protected areas", or "national parks." As I have shown in the brief history of uneven development in Taveuni, unsuitable for large plantations to be developed because of its topography, Bouma and nearby mountain forests and coastal zones were soon casted into wilderness and created as periphery in the blossoming island plantation economy. And now, as nature-based tourism is seen as the way out for rural land-owning communities in Fiji, the once inaccessible is today a space available for modern ecotourism development.

However, when planters and colonial botanists saw a wild and empty forest with no production values and in need of being conserved, when tourists and conservation workers saw a protected area with marketing potentials, the indigenous Fijian saw a *vanua* that is embedded with social relations and customary obligations. They yearn for development, but it is envisioned in their own terms. I by no means think that this *vanua* is a perpetual traditional Fijian concept passed down through generations without change, but it is still a meaningful framework constantly reenacted in real life circumstances. In *Waitabu*, for example, the crisis of their chiefdom and custom made them reconsider the effectiveness of conservation and the state of their own *vanua*. It is important that we recognize these indigenous visions as part of the environment today, which is often defined in scientific or capitalistic terms, and imagined as neutral, without a history of complex colonial encounters.

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## Notes

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<sup>ii</sup> For example, see the real estate website: <http://www.taveunirealestate.com/>, which states that "Taveuni also has one of the largest percentages of freehold titled land in Fiji." According to data collected in the 70s by Brookfield, almost half of the island (49.5%) were freehold, among which 70% were owned by companies, Europeans or Part-Europeans (Brookfield 1978:58). This is extremely higher than the nation-wide 7% freehold percentage in Fiji.

<sup>iii</sup> "[Tui Cakau] sold more land to Europeans than perhaps any other chief in Fiji, rarely consulting the occupants first; and though doubtless the latter murmured, they never resisted him and rarely opposed the Europeans who came to settle" (Scarr 1973:38).

<sup>iv</sup> When I interviewed the agricultural officer in Taveuni about the most significant obstacle for farmers in Bouma, he immediately replied "topography."

<sup>v</sup> In the year 2010, *Waitabu* had 223 visitors, while *Lavena* had 2,502 and *Korovou* 4,368. *Vidawa* Rainforest Hike had the lowest number of visitors, with only 79 visiting their project.