
The Valley and the Mountains Are One: Indigenous Knowledge and the Architecture of Customary Governance in Fiji

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"Ni vuvu na ulu ni wai, ena vuvu sobu mai."

Fijian Proverb: When the headwaters (the source of the river) are muddy, the water flowing downstream will also be muddy.

Introduction – A traditional conservation story

In the northern coast of the Tailevu province on eastern mainland Vitilevu is Naigani island. This island is known as the *sovaniika kei Ratu* (fish basket of the Ratu – the titular of the ancient high chief of Fiji known as the Ratu mai Verata). The island is the home of the trevally fish, totem fish of Verata. Women use nets to catch it for meals twice a day – the morning catch or *ivakavakayadra* and the evening catch or *ivakavakamoce*. If a woman catches more than she needs, she is bound by custom to share one with another who has not caught any. The cooking and consumption of the trevally is also guarded by custom. There must only be one cut on the fish – around its middle side. The meal must be consumed within the day and not kept for the next day because each day brings new provisions and blessings. The bones of a consumed fish are carefully collected and returned to a particular point on the beach and placed carefully on the sand. The next high tide will carry the bones away to regenerate them again into living swimming fish. It is forbidden to take the trevally away from Naigani island. Even the great Ratu himself, if he wishes to eat it, must present himself on the island to eat it. The custom is called *ika ni veilomani* (fish for mutual sharing and consumption) and *qoli ni veinanumi* (fishing that mutually esteems the wellbeing of the other). It is not uncommon for locals to catch a regenerated trevally for its flesh would be a little flatter than one that is caught for the first time. One can hold up a regenerated trevally in the sun and catch the faint mark of the knife in its middle from its previous cut. Maintaining this custom ensures the continuity of its mana¹ and abundance.

¹ Mana works alongside *tabu* (sacred or restricted states). Greater prestige or status means a person or object is surrounded by a higher degree of *tabu*

Abstract

This paper is adapted and extended from an initial panel presentation at the 11th Pacific Islands Conference of Nature Conservation Pacific conference held at Jibao Culture Centre in New Caledonia in September 2026. The author was a panellist at the Tuesday September 08 session on *Area Based Conservation and Connectivity: People at the Centre*. This extended paper continues the broad articulation on the intrinsic relationship between indigenous knowledge (*iTaukei* traditional ecological, cultural, and spiritual epistemologies) and indigenous or customary governance in Fiji. Using the philosophical metaphor "*The valley and the mountains are one*," demonstrates that environmental, spatial, and social knowledge in Fiji cannot be separated from customary governance structures. Indigenous knowledge is regulated, preserved, and operationalized through a multi-tiered hierarchy of cultural leadership—spanning intra-clan (*Tokatoka*), clan (*Mataqali*), tribal (*Yavusa*), district (*Tikina*), and inter-clan/confederacy (*Vanua*) jurisdictions. Through an analysis of customary mechanisms, kinship obligations (*Veiwekani*), sacred resource prohibitions (*Tabu*), and leadership socialization (*Yalomatua*), this study highlights that indigenous governance serves as both the custodian and executive authority of indigenous knowledge, ensuring holistic well-being (*Sautu*) and ecological equilibrium across interconnected landscapes.

Cosmological and Landscape Unity

The proverb and philosophical framework "*The valley and the mountains are one*" reflects the non-dualistic, holistic worldview of the indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*) people. In Fijian cosmology, ecological domains—from mountain headwaters (*colo*) through fertile river valleys and coastal plains down to the marine reef ecosystems (*qoliqoli*)—form an indivisible physical and spiritual continuum known as the *Vanua*.

The *Vanua* encompasses the physical land, natural resources, living community, ancestral spirits, and cultural obligations. Consequently, indigenous knowledge is not held as abstract or individualized intellectual property; rather, it is relational, place-based, and inherently bound to the customary governance institutions that structure human interactions with the natural world.

Indigenous Knowledge as the Foundation of Indigenous Governance

Indigenous governance in Fiji is fundamentally knowledge-driven. Decisions regarding land stewardship, seasonal harvesting, dispute resolution, and community development are guided by ancestral wisdom, oral histories, and empirical environmental observations passed down through generations.

The ultimate goal of both indigenous knowledge and traditional governance is the attainment of *Sautu*—a state of holistic peace, prosperity, health, and ecological abundance. Governed by core values such as *Solesolevaki* (communal collaboration towards a shared outcome), *Vakarokoroko* (respect for leadership and protocols), and *Veiqaravi* (relational service), customary governance relies on indigenous knowledge to maintain social order and environmental sustainability.

Multi-Layered Jurisdictions of Cultural Leadership

Indigenous knowledge is structured and regulated by a defined hierarchy of cultural leadership across distinct jurisdictions:

- **Intra-Clan Jurisdiction (*Tokatoka*):** The extended family unit represents the primary locus of socialization and early knowledge transmission. Within the *Tokatoka*, foundational values of respect (*Vakarokoroko*) and lineage identity (*Wakatu*) are taught through practical rites of passage (e.g., *Matai ni Ca Buka*—first firewood gathering, *Matai ni Qoli*—first fishing catch).

- **Clan Jurisdiction (*Mataqali*):** The primary landowning unit in Fijian society. Each *Mataqali* holds specific traditional roles and specialized knowledge within the broader social architecture:
 - *Bati*: Warriors and territorial guardians.
 - *Matanivanua*: Traditional heralds, spokespersons, and custodians of diplomatic protocol.
 - *Gonedau*: Traditional fishermen and marine environmental managers.
 - *Sauturaga*: Kingmakers and chief-makers who advise and validate chiefly appointments.
- **Tribal Jurisdiction (*Yavusa*):** Comprising several *Mataqali* (land owning units) descended from a common ancestral founder, the *Yavusa* is governed by hereditary chiefs (*Turaga*) alongside ceremonial advisors (*Sau Turaga* and *Qase ni Vanua*). At this level, indigenous knowledge governs collective land use, tribal ceremonies, and inter-clan alignment.
- **Inter-Clan and Regional Jurisdiction (*Vanua / Tikina*):** Spanning multiple *Yavusa* across broader geographical catchments—connecting the mountain ridges to the river valleys and coastlines—the *Vanua* structure manages shared ecosystems. Inter-clan protocols, such as *Vasu* rights (maternal lineage entitlements) and *Veiganeni* (male-female kinship code of respect), regulate resource sharing, conflict resolution, and regional governance.
- **Confederacy Level (*Matanitu*):** Overarching customary alliances (such as Kubuna, Burebasaga, and Tovata) that embody regional customary law, inter-regional diplomacy, and macro-political governance.

Mechanisms of Knowledge Regulation and Customary Law

- **Tabu and Culturally Protected Areas:** The declaration of temporary or permanent resource closures (e.g., *Tabu* marine or terrestrial areas following the passing of a chief) is an executive function of traditional governance that applies traditional ecological knowledge to regenerate ecosystems and restore marine biomass.
- **Leadership Socialization and *Yalomatua*:** Traditional leadership is earned through service, humility, and spiritual maturity (*Yalomatua*), encapsulated in the Fijian proverb "*Mo qara cake mai nibera ni o qara sobu*" (Look up in humility before looking down to lead). Authoritative knowledge carries spiritual responsibility (*Mana*) and ethical accountability.
- **Protection of Intellectual Heritage:** Cultural mechanisms, such as totem recognition safeguard ancestral knowledge, traditional medicine, and oral histories from commercial exploitation or cultural appropriation, keeping indigenous knowledge grounded in customary jurisdiction.

Methodology: Research Design, Evidence, and Interpretation

The methodology used in the lead up to the paper combines documentary analysis with quantitative and qualitative evidence reported in Live & Learn Fiji's *KIWA EMPOWER Nbs* and ADRA Fiji's *SHAPE-CAR*² materials. These two projects were specific in culturally grounded mixed methods that reflect how indigenous knowledge and customary governance operate in practice. It is further informed by the *Vanua Research Framework*, in which knowledge is understood as relational, place-based, collectively held, and ethically governed. Rather than treating community testimony as supplementary to numerical evidence, the

² Sustainable Health, Agriculture, Protection and Empowerment (SHAPE), Climate Action for Resilience (CAR)

design places household data, observation, *talanoa*³, and customary protocol in dialogue so that findings can be interpreted within the social and ecological systems from which they arise.

Data Collection

An initial desktop component in 2024 under ADRA Fiji's SHAPE CAR project reviewed programme reports, baseline instruments, cultural-awareness reports, village profiles, and implementation plans produced for community resilience initiatives in Fiji. Attention was given to descriptions of research sites, sampling, cultural entry procedures, household conditions, traditional leadership, food security, health, climate exposure, natural-resource management, and community decision-making. The ADRA SHAPE-CAR baseline provided the most explicit empirical dataset: thirteen trained voluntary enumerators collected data over nine field days between 19 June and 3 July 2024 in nine indigenous communities across the Rewa, Noco, Toga, and Vutia districts. A Kobo Collect digital survey was completed by 161 households, comprising 65 female-headed and 96 male-headed households.

Qualitative evidence was gathered through eight focus-group discussions—four men's groups and four women's groups—and key-informant *talanoa* with nine *Turaga-ni-Koro*⁴, eight *Nasi-ni-Koro*⁵, women's and youth representatives, and two district representatives. These conversations were designed to reveal governance practices, environmental observations, social dynamics, and community priorities that a closed survey could not adequately capture. Data collection followed customary entry and relationship-building protocols, including

³ **Talanoa** is a traditional Pacific Island concept that means an open, inclusive, and transparent conversation or dialogue without a rigid agenda or hierarchy.

⁴ Turaganikoro or TNK for short are village headmen nominated by each village in Fiji and are managed by the iTaukei Affairs Board in the Ministry iTaukei Affairs.

⁵ Nasi ni koro are village nurses who are nominated by each village in Fiji and are managed by the Ministry of Health,

leadership-level consent, community mobilisation, use of local language, and gender-sensitive groupings. This helped align research conduct with *Vakarokoroko* (respect), *Veiwekani* (relational/relationships) and *Veidolei* (reciprocity,) while recognising that access to knowledge is mediated through legitimate custodians and community relationships.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Quantitative survey records were cleaned on the Kobo server, exported to Excel, and examined using descriptive statistics to identify frequencies, distributions, patterns, and differences across households and villages. Qualitative discussions were transcribed from iTaukei into English and analysed thematically. Recurring concepts—including *Vanua* (land), *Sautu* (well-being), *Tabu* (taboo/sacredness), leadership legitimacy, communal labour, inclusion, food security, and climate resilience—were compared across focus groups, key informants, documentary sources, and the survey result. Interpretation proceeded through triangulation: a proposition was treated as stronger when numerical trends, participant accounts, direct observations, and programme records converged. Apparent differences were retained as context-specific findings rather than forced into a single universal account.

Empirical Illustrations of Philosophy and Governance in Practice

- **Food security and environmental risk:** Forty per cent of surveyed households experienced moderate or severe food insecurity, while 31 per cent reported that agricultural activities had been damaged by natural disasters or hazards. These findings show that ecological disturbance in the wider catchment becomes a household and governance concern.
- **Customary authority as an implementation pathway:** The SHAPE-CAR process engaged *Turaga-ni-Koro*, *Nasi-ni-Koro*, women's groups, youth

representatives, and district representatives. Their participation illustrates how projects move through overlapping customary and administrative structures rather than through individual households alone.

- **Vunuku Village (Rewa Province) as a practical case:** A two-day cultural-awareness process identified five church denominations, enduring traditional leadership, and the continuing importance of *Wakatu (identity)*, *Vakarokoroko (respect)*, *Veiwekani (relationships)*, *Vanua (land)*, and *Sautu (well-being)*. The resulting implementation guidance called for communication through recognised leaders, inclusive consultation, collective decision-making, and the use of *Tabu* and indigenous ecological knowledge in resource-management activities. These cultural values demonstrate how philosophical principles are translated into concrete governance arrangements for climate resilience, food security, and community ownership.

Reliability, Ethics, and Limitations

Reliability was strengthened through enumerator training, use of standardised digital instruments, daily uploading and cleaning of survey records, gender-disaggregated discussion spaces, translation of iTaukei testimony, comparison of multiple evidence sources, and community-oriented validation procedures. The household findings nevertheless remain self-reported and may be affected by recall, differing interpretations of questions, or the expectation that reporting hardship could attract assistance. The baseline design mitigated this risk by clarifying the study's purpose and triangulating selected claims with direct observation, such as the type and distance of water sources. The evidence collected from the communities in the province of Rewa can be a generic starting point for the chiefdoms and provinces in Fiji. This will however, be replete with its respective layers of distinctive contextual nuances. Culturally sensitive

knowledge is reported only at a level endorsed by its village custodians; this is a methodological requirement because validity depends not only on accuracy, but also on maintaining the relationships and customary authority through which knowledge is legitimately shared.

Resonating Literature Review

The conceptual foundation of this paper is strongly supported by Nabobo-Baba⁶ (2006), which establishes the *Vanua Research Framework* and demonstrates that knowledge creation, learning, and research ethics arise from the *Vanua* itself. Her account of relational ties, ancestral wisdom, and the collective pursuit of *Sautu* (wellbeing) provides the epistemological basis for treating household data, *talanoa*, observation, and customary protocol as mutually reinforcing forms of evidence. Ravuvu⁷ (1983) complements this framework by explaining how kinship networks, customary leadership roles, and *Vanua* values organise social life. These works further substantiate that indigenous knowledge is not an abstract body of information separate from governance; it is produced, transmitted, validated, and applied through relationships that connect people, authority, land, and spiritual obligation.

This relationship becomes especially consequential under conditions of climate change and environmental stress. Veitayaki⁸ (2002) shows that Indigenous and Traditional Knowledge is embedded in customary governance and continues to inform natural-resource management, disaster-risk reduction, *Tabu* closures, and resilient community infrastructure.

⁶ *Knowing and Learning: An Indigenous Fijian Epistemology*

⁷ *The Fijian Way of Life*

⁸ *Taking Advantage of Indigenous Knowledge: the Fiji Case*

The authority through which such knowledge becomes collective action is further clarified by Lin (2019)⁹ and Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi (2006)¹⁰. Lin demonstrates that chiefship is sustained through ceremony, local history, social memory, and recognised legitimacy, while Madraiwiwi situates customary authority within its continuing interaction with contemporary political and administrative institutions. These perspectives illuminate the multi-layered jurisdictions discussed earlier in the paper: authority moves from the *Tokatoka* (extended family unit) and *Mataqali* (Land owning unit) through the *Yavusa* (clan), *Tikina* (district), and *Vanua* (chiefdom), and its effectiveness depends upon relational accountability rather than formal office alone. This further supports why the SHAPE-CAR process engaged *Turaga-ni-Koro*, *Nasi-ni-Koro*, women, youth, and district representatives. Such participation was not merely consultative; it reflected the overlapping customary and administrative pathways through which knowledge gains legitimacy, decisions are made, and community action becomes possible.

Finally, the Sauvaka Culture Consultancy *Cultural Awareness and Governance Reports for Vunuku, Vunimakosoi, Na iYalayala, and Vunisei Villages* (2025–2026) provide the field-level bridge between the paper’s philosophical argument and its practical illustrations. By documenting how *Tokatoka*, *Mataqali*, and *Vanua* leadership structures guide community development, climate resilience, and cultural-heritage protection, these reports show that values such as *Wakatu*, *Vakarokoroko*, *Veiwekani*, *Tabu*, and *Sautu* function as operational principles. The Vunuku case, for example, demonstrates how culturally appropriate entry, communication through recognised leaders, inclusive consultation, and

⁹ More than a “Petty Chief”: Understanding Fijian Chiefship through the Entrance Ceremony and Local History

¹⁰ Keynote address, *Governance in Fiji: The Interplay Between Indigenous Tradition, Culture and Politics*

collective decision-making convert indigenous philosophy into programme design and resource-management practice. Collectively, the literature and field evidence affirm the overall argument of this paper: indigenous knowledge is the substance of customary governance, customary governance is the institutional means through which that knowledge is applied, and their integration is essential to ecological balance, cultural continuity, and resilient development across Fiji's connected landscapes.

The literature reinforces the metaphor at the heart of the paper: the mountains, valleys, rivers, villages, and reefs cannot be governed as isolated spaces because ecological change travels through the same social and customary networks that organise collective responsibility.

Challenges in the Valley and the Mountain

The harmony expressed in the principle that “the valley and the mountains are one” is increasingly challenged by both natural disasters and human-induced pollution. Cyclones, floods, landslides, droughts, and coastal inundation can strip vegetation from mountain slopes, destabilise soils, damage gardens and forests, and carry sediment and debris through rivers into valleys, estuaries, mangroves, and reef systems. In the same analogy, the connection between the valley and the mountain can be obscured and even threatened by modernization, capitalism, individualism and colonising systems like education which are devoid of indigenous values and immersive cultural knowledge and experiences. Education is a socialising agency which prioritizes individual merit instead of cultural collaboration. Traditional Western schooling values competition and individual achievement. Thaman (2009)¹¹ argues that the teaching/learning environments of

¹¹ "Towards Cultural Democracy in Teaching and Learning With Specific References to Pacific Island Nations (PINs),"

most formal educational institutions in Pacific Islands Nations (PINs) are culturally undemocratic: that is, they do not take into consideration the way most Pacific people think, learn and communicate with one another. This is true not only of the values that underpin the curriculum but also the methods that most teachers use, and the way in which student learning is assessed and evaluated.

There is also another colonising agency in the form of certain Christian denominational stances that denounce culture as pagan and even demonic. These two systems have largely socialized the minds of young indigenous people and society away from the orally transmitted values and knowledge and its spirituality to one that only foregrounds the modern and tangible.

Mcnaught's ¹²(1982) analysis mention how the colonial experience of the Fijians in the early 20th century - their land rights, village and district politics, chiefly leadership, underground movements and various British efforts to 'improve' them became a failure of vague policies fostering individualism and enterprise to interrupt the continuities of a vigorously autonomous social and political world maintaining eight of ten Fijians in a relatively affluent neotraditional order.

Why Indigenous Community-Led Conservation Matters. It is imperative that international, regional, and local conservation organisations move beyond merely acknowledging Indigenous knowledge and customary governance in policies, speeches, and project documents, and instead proactively pursue conservation from the worldview, authority, and lived experience of Indigenous peoples themselves. Indigenous communities are not simply stakeholders to be consulted after priorities, methods, and funding arrangements have already been determined; they are knowledge holders, rights holders, custodians, and

¹² The Fijian Colonial Experience: a study of the neotraditional order under british colonial rule prior to world war ii

governing authorities whose relationships with land, water, forests, rivers, and reefs have been developed and tested across generations. Conservation undertaken only through external scientific, institutional, or donor-defined frameworks risks extracting knowledge while marginalising the very systems that give that knowledge meaning, legitimacy, and practical force. A genuinely Indigenous-led approach therefore requires organisations to enter through culturally appropriate protocols, recognise customary jurisdictions, share decision-making power and resources, protect intellectual heritage, support community-defined indicators of wellbeing, and remain accountable to Indigenous custodians throughout design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. When conservation is approached from this stance, principles such as *Vanua*, *Veiwekani*, *Tabu*, *Solesolevaki*, and *Sautu* cease to be ceremonial references and become the ethical and operational architecture of environmental action. Such a shift is essential because the enduring protection of the valley, the mountains, and the connected waters between them depends not only on recognising Indigenous knowledge, but on restoring Indigenous peoples' authority to lead the governance of the living systems to which they belong.

Conclusion

The philosophy "*The valley and the mountains are one*" is ultimately made visible in living cultural relationships such as the trevally fish of Naigani. These are not merely species occupying isolated habitats, but spiritual relations embedded in ancestral narratives, customary law, collective identity, and the moral order of the *Vanua*. The cultural significance attached to Naigani's trevally similarly reminds all that marine life may be understood as kin, messenger, guardian, or manifestation of ancestral presence rather than simply as a resource for extraction. Their survival therefore depends upon more than scientific classification or externally

imposed conservation rules: it depends upon the continuity of the stories, custodians, rituals, chiefly authority, and community obligations that make protection spiritually binding and socially legitimate. These examples bring the paper's central argument full circle. Water descends from mountain forests through valleys, rivers, groundwater passages, coasts, and reefs; in the same way, knowledge, authority, spirituality, and responsibility flow through *Tokatoka*, *Mataqali*, *Yavusa*, *Tikina*, and *Vanua*. To disturb one part is to unsettle the whole, and to protect one sacred species is to defend an entire web of ecological and cultural relationships. Indigenous-led conservation is therefore not an optional cultural addition to environmental policy, but an essential system of governance through which communities sustain *Sautu*, uphold intergenerational responsibility, and preserve the indivisible unity of the mountains, the valley, and the sea.

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