

Yavirau: A traditional Fijian Fish Drive as an Example of Culturally Embedded Community Development

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Abstract: A yavirau (traditional Fijian fish drive) is an ancient Fijian custom which has been adapted to today's needs. Implemented and organised by a village community without external assistance, this highly culturally specific custom is an example of development on a local level. According to theorists and practitioners working on development issues, such a strategy for Community Development (CD) is promising because it seizes current approaches as it fosters local, decentralised, cultural specific development and aims at a high level of local participation. This research note analyses a yavirau as an example of CD, showing its advantages as well as its limitations.

Key Words: Fiji; Community Development; participation; culture; neo-traditionalism

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The Fijian islanders, together with other populations of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), are exposed to various kinds of social and ecological threats. SIDS are characterised by a geographically isolated location and small absolute numbers of residents; two factors that account for barely diversified, weak economies. Because of their limited surface, the density of population on some islands is high, whereas marine and land resources are scarce. Yet, Fijian coastal villagers highly depend on them as they live on semi-subsistence fishing and agriculture. However, these resources are likely to be overexploited and polluted. Climate change and sea level rise are further stressors and are likely to intensify hazards like tropical cyclones and coastal erosion. Moreover, with political instability and a military dictatorship in charge, Fiji has a democratic deficit – like other insular states in the South Pacific. All in all, SIDS have no voice in international discourses but are strongly affected by the impacts of global change (Baldacchino, 2009; Chand & Walsh 2009; Kaly et al., 2002; Mataki et al., 2008).



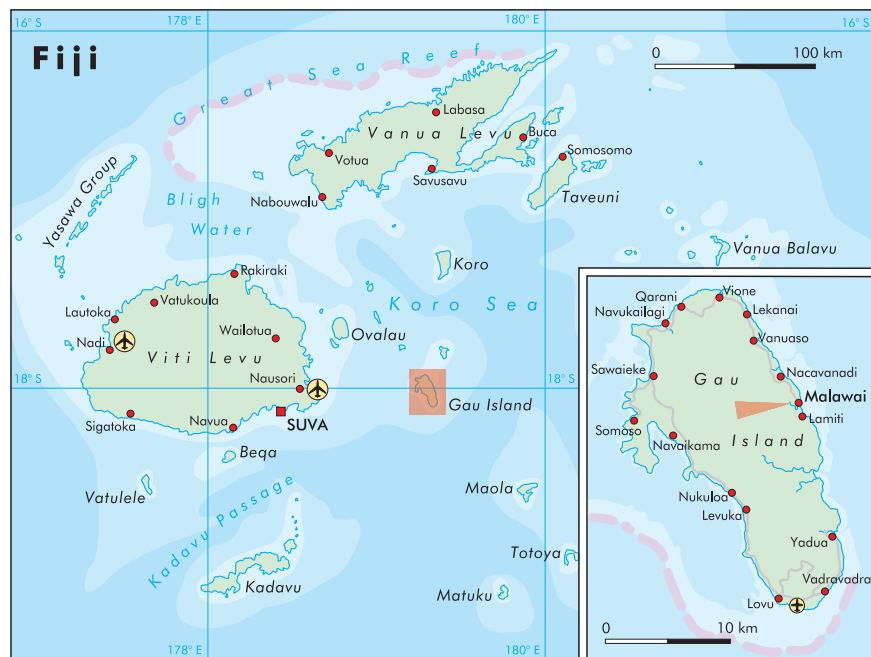
Globalisation shapes the world economy and affects social structures and spatial organisation. It is characterised by the simultaneity of including and excluding processes that tend to fragment societies (Dittrich, 2011). The Fiji Islands are subject to this global phenomenon. The Fijians are confronted with capitalistic economic interactions. Furthermore, the influence of neo-liberal, individual sets of values changes their livelihoods. Many Fijians are afraid their cultural individuality might dissolve, causing a loss of cultural identity (Abramson, 2004), which would harm the quality of their lives.

Having all these challenges in mind, the Fijians have urgent needs to foster their development. Fortunately, many Fijian communities provide over a broad range of strategies to handle these challenges. Community Development (CD) is considered to be an auspicious approach to strengthen the capabilities and the resilience of local community members (Kay, 2005; Veitayaki, 2006).

This research notes examines the promotion of a traditional fish drive and its contribution to mitigating the impacts of globalisation, climate and environmental change. It thus provides a practical example of successful CD. After a short introduction on theoretical concepts and the methodology used by the author, the *yavirau* will be described, highlighting the specific challenges the fish drive addresses. Furthermore, its limitations will be presented, followed by a conclusion on the efficiency of the *yavirau* to improve development.

Development in theory

Human development is defined as a process of enhancing people's freedoms and capabilities, improving the quality of people's lives (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 2000). At least three conditions of development must be fulfilled to make this process an entirely positive one. First, development must target vulnerable people. Processes of improving quality of life which exclude the most suffering groups within society do not lead to development. Second, development must be sustainable. The development of the present generation should not decrease the capabilities, assets and livelihood opportunities of the following genera-



Location Map of Gau Island

tions, so human and natural resources are not to be exploited (Chambers & Convey, 1992). Third, human dignity must not be harmed. In this way, development means the protection from violence, the ensuring of basic needs, and the freedom to take action on one's own behalf, in accordance with the concept of human security (CHS, 2003). Besides the enhancement of international human rights, local cultural values need to be considered as well, as the quality of people's lives should be measured by their own value systems. CD substantiates the important role that culture plays in development. Using a decentralised approach, it focuses on specific local and cultural desires of vulnerable people and pleads for changes from within cultures. CD emphasises types of participation in which local people control the process as this enhances empowerment (Ensor & Berger, 2009; Kay, 2005; Kumar, 2002). Therefore, CD has the potential to improve sustainability and the quality of life.

Of course, values are never static, but change over time. Likewise culture is not fixed or homogenous. People have multiple identities and build complex societies. Some values and identities are shared by almost all members of a society, while on others they disagree. Due to globalisation and colonisation, native Fijians have been exposed to different value systems. Even before the colonial era, a huge variety of values and customs existed (Ravuvu, 1987). Tradition is

understood as a prolonged process of integrating changes, omissions and additions of customs into one culture without degrading cultural identity (Toren, 1988). Therefore, though not a homogenous people, Fijians share a system of values, beliefs and customs which can still be described as a unique Fijian culture, and which has been idealised as the "Fijian Way of Life" (Ravuvu, 1983; 1987). Development must handle contradicting values, beliefs and customs within this system.

Participatory research methods

The investigated *yavirau* was organised by the villagers of Malawai, Gau Island. In order to understand their needs, values and challenges, a highly participatory set of methods was chosen. The author lived in the village for five weeks and gathered information through participant observation, informal conversations and various methods from the "PRA-toolbox" (participatory rural appraisal), including transects, scorings, Venn-diagrams of social institutions as well as trend-analyses of social and ecological problems (Kumar, 2002). Each PRA-method was facilitated several times with different focal groups regarding to age, sex, clan-membership and confession to identify possible social vulnerabilities. Community participation not only provided the researcher with information, it also tried to place empowerment of communities to articulate, protect, maintain and enhance their ideas of a good life.

Traditional fish drive

The decision to undertake a *yavirau* is made within a traditional community meeting. It is scheduled on Christmas Eve. At this time of the year, which is the local summer vacation, non-residents join the fishing most easily. The interviewed villagers say that the *yavirau* sometimes is the major reason why people in the urban areas spend their Christmas break in the village.

First of all, to implement a *yavirau*, the graveyards must be cleaned, which has enormous ritualistic importance as it links the present generation to their forefathers and -mothers. All men of the village engage in this enjoyable activity, while women prepare a feast in the community hall. The people celebrate and drink *yagona*, so that the *yavirau* will receive the blessing of their ancestors.

Preparations for the fish drive start with the collection of vines, which are tied together. The villagers then obtain coconut fronds that are wrapped around the liana ropes. Prepared lianas have to be whipped with the branches and leaves of the blinding tree to ward off bad luck like unsuccessful catches, accidents or drowning. Pregnant women are not allowed to take part in the *yavirau* as it is believed that they bring bad luck, especially if they have kept their pregnancy secret. In this case, even the leaves of the blinding tree are powerless to prevent misfortune.

Once the ropes are prepared, they are rolled up and loaded into motorised fibreglass boats. At high tide they are taken out towards the reef. Once the ropes are released to the sea, they are tied together, forming a horseshoe shape whose opening faces the shore. The rope, which is about four kilometres long, frames the fishing site. A marine protected area (MPA) installed several years before to sustain the fishing ground is a no-go area; an exception is made for the *yavirau*. The people are positioned along the rope to keep it in place. Depending on their number each clan is in charge of a part of the loop. Visitors are free to choose their position. As a rule – like pregnant women – children and latecomers are not allowed to join. This is to minimise the risks of drowning and distraction, though nowadays exceptions are made for latecomers. Usually, the commander of the *yavirau* is the chief's herald or the chief himself. He is the only one who is allowed to talk and give orders.

In the past disobedience entailed corporal punishment. Nowadays people are talking, laughing and playing during the whole process. The commander stands in the boat, constantly moving from one end of the rope to the other. When he is satisfied with the deployment of his people, the hauling of the rope begins. The prepared vines are noisily drawn through the sea to chase the fish. The rope is pulled towards one end, where the lianas are piled up on the shore. At the commander's order the process is repeatedly reversed and the rope is pulled to the other end. In this way, the enclosure slowly narrows. Simultaneously the piled up vines are used as a second or third row to strengthen the rope so no fish can escape.

Towards the end of the drive at low tide, the fish are driven to a small pool close to the shore in shallow water. Everyone has to sit down so the fish are neither upset nor provoked. A kind of human wall is built to minimise breakaways. Yet, people stand up to get out of the cold water, so that relatives of the chief's herald consider it their duty to constantly remind them of the order given by the commander. Once the commander gives permission, everybody catches the fish using spears, machetes, nets or their bare hands.

Later the capture is distributed on the lawn of the village centre. Every village member gets his or her own share. Some species are reserved to specific clans. The reason for this goes back to ancient beliefs on how certain living beings are associated with the traditional functions of each clan. Furthermore, the chief, the priest, the visitors, the owners of the boats and the hosts from whose land the vines and coconut leaves have been taken get an extra amount. This distribution is perceived as fair because it compensates for the responsibility these people bear and the expenses they have incurred. In a second step, the families individually share parts of their stock with friends and relatives in neighbouring villages.

Challenges for development

The process of change in society has accelerated and is getting more complex and dynamic due to globalisation. Accordingly, the Fijians fear that new habits cannot be integrated properly anymore and traditions and cultural identities weaken (Abramson, 2004).

This harms development because the quality of life depends on culturally specific components. Social transformation induced by globalisation erodes social safety networks as well because these networks are built on trust which correlates with cultural identity. So, especially the weakest groups, who depend most on such safety networks, become more vulnerable. As development aims at the most vulnerable people, social transformation likely contradicts development (Tröger, 2003).

The inhabitants of Fijian villages in the periphery have insufficient means to earn a living. Apart from working as teachers they hardly find jobs to earn regular wages. Due to high transportation costs and weak accesses to the nearest market, the villagers can hardly sell anything except *yagona* – a plant that takes three to seven years to grow – and hand-woven mats. Therefore the villagers rely on remittances coming from family members, who live in Fijian cities or overseas. Thus, they are vulnerable and dependent on safety networks.

Most Fijians who participated in the PRA-methods praised communal life. The performance of the *yavirau* requires sound social relationships and simultaneously re-strengthens these networks. The benefits are impressive as the *yavirau* not only enhances relationships within the local village community, but also those with the friends and relatives joining from urban areas and neighbouring villages. Even people who did not partake themselves were given a share of the fish as it is meant to support socialising during Christmas time.

The *yavirau* focuses on peripheral villages. It targets vulnerable people. Furthermore, each villager decides in how far he or she participates in the decision making process, the preparation and the execution of the *yavirau*. Thereby, knowledge is passed on over generations. This unique custom fosters cultural identity, strengthens social ties, enhances human security and therefore improves the quality of peoples' lives.

However, the *yavirau* has been subject to changes. Corporal punishments to sanction misbehaviour do no longer exist, as a consequence the custom still appeals to the younger, more modern generation. Additionally, it is adaptive to other strategies of development, for example, because it does not violate

the borders of MPA. As for Malawai village, the *yavirau* can be considered as a powerful activity to develop, as it is culturally embedded, yet open to changes to face today's challenges. Therefore, it supports the "Fijian Way of Life" and gains widespread acceptance among the participants.

Limitations to development

The *yavirau* needs a specific environment. Minimum requirements are a suitable reef, resources to produce the rope, expertise to carry out the *yavirau* and a supporting community. Thus, only few Fijian villages perform the drive. As the villagers themselves can only implement a *yavirau*, options for external support are rare and there are few chances for other village communities to copy this specific CD strategy.

There are negative impacts on the environment to be mentioned. The amount of fish caught at once threatens the future of the fishing ground, especially as the villagers catch juvenile and small fish. Moving around the coral reef for hours in large groups is destructive to the sensitive corals. Yet, an intact coral reef can be expected to cope with most disturbances, as there is only one *yavirau* per year, followed by a fishing ban of several days. On the other hand, due to general tendencies of overfishing and impacts of climate change and pollution, one must assume that the quality of the reef is already degrading, which means that the *yavirau* cannot be called sustainable.

Neo-traditional movements aim at re-establishing ancient customs in order to strengthen cultural identity and consider development. The prefix "neo" highlights that traditional customs are not acted out for their intrinsic values only, instead neo-traditionalism actively tries to reinforce such values. The *yavirau* can be described as a neo-traditional activity because the villagers are aware that they carry out the fish drive as a development strategy. They do not only want to take part in the *yavirau* because of its intrinsic attractiveness and to use the cooperation of the village to catch fish for Christmas, but also to reinforce cultural norms and values in general – to uphold the "Fijian Way of Life". Yet, neo-traditionalism often denies innovations. There is a potential risk that the *yavirau* will

not keep its adaptive capacities, if useful future changes are forbidden.

Furthermore, among political nationalists the neo-traditional slogan of the "Fijian Way of Life" is popular for manipulation. On the national level, Fiji is a multi-ethnic state with an Indo-Fijian minority that currently makes up about 37 per cent of the whole population (FIBOS, 2010). Demands to reinforce ethno-Fijian traditions can be understood as directed against minorities. Since 1987 several coups d'état consolidated ethno-Fijian rights, referring to the "Fijian Way of Life". Instead of integrating foreign influences into the Fijian culture, political rhetoric can misuse neo-traditionalism to demand ethno-national privileges and to stir up racial tensions. In the last 25 years many Indo-Fijians left the country creating a brain drain and shrinking economies (FIBOS, 2010; Lal, 2003; Lawson, 2004). Though the *yavirau* itself does not create any racial tensions, there is a risk that on the national level the example of the *yavirau* can be abused as a means of dividing the nation.

All things considered, the *yavirau* is an outstanding example of local CD. This note tried to highlight two characteristics of advantageous CD, the cultural embeddedness, which ensures great acceptance and the openness to changes to meet new challenges. Yet, the *yavirau* itself is such a specific adaptive strategy that it cannot be extrapolated widely.

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