

“Are They Evil?”: Denominational Competition and Cultural Demonization on a Fijian Island

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This paper is a critical analysis of the rapid changes that have been taking place within the Sawau community on the Island of Beqa, Fiji, over the past ten years. The Fijian firewalking ceremony (*vilavilavevo*) traditionally performed only by members of the Sawau people is a prime example of a propitiation ritual that has become commodified to suit the requirements of tourism. More recently, the reproduction of tradition among the Sawau and their *vilavilavevo* practice is causing an unprecedented dogmatic schism between Fiji’s Methodist Church and two Pentecostal churches. Over the last two centuries, the “gift” of firewalking has transmuted itself into a sociocultural tool that has consistently indigenized the power of the foreign, allowing its custodians to locally sustain their community and to gain a reach and respect across the nation and beyond. To disentangle the intertwined topics of tradition and change on the Island of Beqa, and understand whose cultural views and values are being privileged or debased, this paper pays close attention to the Christian cultural dynamics and social tensions surrounding the *vilavilavevo* created by a denominational opposition swiftly reshaping local notions of heritage, social sentiment, and social capital.

Keywords: Fiji, firewalking, cultural heritage, Christianity, dogmatic schism

1. Introduction

In February 2005, while chatting with me about the *veli*—the fairy creatures populating Fijian oral histories—of the Fijian firewalking ceremony (*vilavilavevo*), Epeli Hau’ofa blurted out: “Are they *evil*? Why are they considered *tevoro* [devils]? Christianity has been indigenized,” he continued, “and Beqan people might have been forced to realign their beliefs to the Christian religion, but the beliefs are still there!”¹ His bold statement immediately reminded me of Rusiate Nayacakalou’s observation that “there are still clear traces of belief in the supernatural beings once held to influence the affairs of the men” (1975: 92). We were talking at the Oceania Centre

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¹ Epeli Hau’ofa (1939–2009) was one of the Pacific’s most influential leaders in the academic and creative arena. A Fiji Islander writer and anthropologist, Hau’ofa was born of Tongan missionary parents working in Papua New Guinea. At one time the head of the Department of Sociology at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, in 1997 he became the founder and director of the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific.

for Arts and Culture at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, and before I left, Hau'ofa showed me an impressive carving by the Centre's artist Paula Liga, who had used a 15-foot *vaivai* (acacia) tree cut down for a road extension near Suva's cemetery. The carving had been recently unveiled to the public. "It is like this carving," Hau'ofa said; "you cannot take the images of myths and legends it incorporates out of it." This echoes something he had written a few years before: "to deny the relevance of tradition in our lives is to repudiate our sources of knowledge, our cultures, our very selves. It is a prescription for getting lost at sea" (Hau'ofa, 1993: 130).

During my residence in Suva, Hau'ofa and I met at other times to talk about the rhetorics and rituals of cultural cleansing imposed by the Methodist and Pentecostal Churches in Beqa, an island iconic in Fiji for the practice of *vilavilavevo*. The reproduction of tradition on Beqa is currently being shaped by social processes such as conversion and commoditization. The *vilavilavevo* (literally "jumping into the earth oven") is a dramatic ceremony traditionally performed only by members of the Naivilaqata clan of the Sawau people on the island of Beqa, and is a prime example of a propitiation ritual that has become commodified to suit the requirements of tourism (Pigliasco, 2007, 2009a, 2010, 2012). Elsewhere (Pigliasco, 2007, 2009b, 2010; Pigliasco and Lipp, 2011), I have observed that despite the changed context, the Sawau performers of *vilavilavevo* perceive an astonishing degree of continuity between the old and the new situations. While the *masawe* (cordyline rhizomes: *Cordyline fruticosa* and *C. terminalis*) essential to the original ritual and its offering to the *veli* (madrals) are no longer part of it, the practice's touristic allure and consequent value as a product have become its subsistence dimension. The tourist context allows the Sawau, like other Pacific Island artists, to perform a transmutation of wealth through ritual, and also to exercise novel forms of power and artistic expression.

Hau'ofa was particularly interested in the *veivakasavasavataki*, a three-month-long process of cleansing undertaken by the Methodist Church between 1 October 2002 and 1 January 2003 in Dakuibeqa that I had quite accidentally run into while visiting there, and in ongoing village factionalism created by two Pentecostal Churches in the nearby village of Rukua, where my consultant and collaborator Mika Tubanavau has been collecting accounts of *vilavilavevo* for the past 30 years. On several occasions, Hau'ofa and I discussed how the coercions implemented by representatives of the Methodist and Pentecostal Christian churches were pointing the finger at the *vilavilavevo* ceremony, inducing the Sawau *dauvila* (lit. experts in firewalking) to abandon efforts to reproduce their traditional culture and instead to make a self-conscious effort to take on a new national (Methodist) or global (Pentecostal) culture (Robbins, 2004: 9). The church representatives are asking the *dauvila*, to use Sahlins' words (1992: 24), "to hate what they



Figure 1. Naivilaqata *Bete Levu* (High Priest) Marika Tivitivi leads the Sawau *dauvila* (firewalkers) into the pit, in Dakuibeqa, 1959 (photo courtesy of Samuela Vakuruivalu)

already have, what they have always considered their well-being.”

This article seeks to reflect on the social tensions surrounding the *vilavilarevo* that have been created by denominational oppositions. These ongoing social tensions index not just how contemporary Christian defensive and offensive strategies challenge local beliefs and practices, but also how these beliefs and practices are strategically reinterpreted under the lens of competitive Christian denominations, independent of their local cultural and historical contexts.

2. Feeding the Myth, Processualizing Culture

Tui Namoliwai is the “god of firewalking,” head of the group of *veli* inhabiting the Namoliwai region, who are often simply called *gone*, literally “children.” They are described as being dark-skinned and shorter than men, with square-built physiques, long thick hair, and a particular idiosyncratic distaste for coconuts. They also sing sweetly, occasionally gratifying the Fijians with a song (Seemann, 1973 [1862]: 204).

Several people in Beqa claim to have seen them or dreamed about them. One day, Wame Turanivalu, a *dauvila* from Dakuibeqa, told me that his wife, originally from Lau, had had a haunting dream populated by hundreds of dark-skinned *gone* with unfamiliar faces running naked around the *lovo* (fire-pit) in front of their house on Dakuibeqa’s waterfront. That particular fire-pit had been prepared a few days before to host a private *vilavilarevo* for the Royal Davui Resort manager and the hotel’s official photographer, who were working on a new brochure.

Wame believes that his wife's dream revealed an error in the execution of the ceremony, which in fact was not properly closed, for it had turned out to be more photo shoot than ceremony (Wame Turanivalu pers. comm.).

In another instance, Waisake Ratulolo, a *dauvila* from Dakuibeqa, told me of being approached after a performance at the Naviti Resort by a puzzled Australian tourist who showed him a strange picture on his digital camera. One of the pictures snapped during the show displayed a short, hairy, naked man inside the *lovo* with the *dauvila*. Elaisa “Junior” Cavu, the presentation manager I met a week later at the Naviti Resort, told me that he had no doubt it was one of the *veli*, and he was thrilled to add this anecdote to his presentation (Waisake Ratulolo pers. comm., Elaisa Cavu pers. comm.).

Everyone agrees on the name and title of their chiefly ancestor, Tui Namoliwai, who inhabits the upper Namoliwai river region in Beqa, mythical setting of the *veli*. There is however no single name for the little gods of firewalking. The array of names used for them in Beqa—*veli* “fairies, gnomes, goblins,” *gone* “children” and, rarely, *manumanu* “little non-human, animal-like beings”—suggests that they are not spirits, witches, ghosts or supernatural entities in their classic connotation, but small numinous beings, always appearing as male, living in a parallel humanlike world, with a village, chief, rules, and dietary and social habits. There are no accounts of them being called to aid in the workings of magic or witchcraft, as benign or malevolent demons might be, nor of possessing people or needing to be exorcised. Evocative of analogous traits is Brewster's vivid description of the *veli* populating Viti Levu's highlands:

The natives of my time [1840–1910] used to maintain that the forest and the waste spaces were still inhabited by a dwarf or pigmy people, visible only to the faithful, handsome little folk with large fuzzy mops of hair, miniatures of what their own were like until they were cropped in deference to the sanitary requirements of the Wesleyan missionaries. These little sylvan creatures were called *Veli* and took the place of our own fairies. They loved the woods, the open grasslands, and the sparkling brooks, and dwelt in hollow trees, caves, and dugouts. (Brewster, 1967 [1922]: 88)

The *vilavilairevo* ceremony was originally a rite of increase, or, as it was described to me, just a ceremony of thanksgiving (*na ka ga ni vakavinavinaka*) free of any malevolent intent (Pigliasco, 2007, 2009, 2010).² An essential element of witchcraft in Fiji is pouring out a libation

² Elsewhere (Pigliasco, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010), I have written that my study of the *vilavilairevo* in Fiji, and comparatively of the *umu tī* (firewalking ceremony) in Ra'iātea, leads me to suspect that in Beqa the practice had the character of a first fruits ceremony (*isevu*), but not a typical one. In Beqa, the *vilavilairevo* was staged whenever they had a large quantity of *masawe* (cordyline rhizomes) to be baked (Na Mata, 1885: 2, Thomson, 1894: 194, Toganivalu, 1914: 2). Oral accounts recognize

of *yaqona* “kava” to the ancestors (Kasuga, 1994; Katz, 1993). *Vilavilairevo* involves neither the presentation or consumption of *yaqona* nor witchcraft (*vakadraunikau*, lit. “practicing sorcery with leaves”). An excerpt from a conversation I had with the late *bete* “priest” Apenisa Kuruiwaca, from Naceva village in Beqa, well recapitulates the point.

The *vakalolo* [pudding] prepared constitutes the *madrali* [offering or thanksgiving to the *veli*]. However, the *vakalolo* should not be offered like a sacrifice. It is just to be prepared and eaten straight away. Its preparation should not be associated with the devil or superstition, for upon completion of preparation the *veli* start eating straight away.... It is more like a thanksgiving, not a sacrifice. The idea [of being associated to witchcraft] was brought about by the reverend [Maikeli Livani] thinking that the *madrali* was a sacrifice to the *kalou vu* [ancestral god].... A pledge made by my uncle [Semi Raikadra] was that: “remember well that if someone tries to demonize *vilavilairevo*, all [*vilavilairevo*] descendants will burn.” *Yaqona* is not a necessary element of the firewalking ceremony: if there were no more *yaqona*, you’d still firewalk for hundreds of years without being harmed.... And if somebody tries to use *yaqona* to gain evil power, then all the firewalkers will get burned. Firewalking is totally a positive ceremony. (Apenisa Kuruiwaca, pers. comm.)

Indeed, I have noticed some confusion about the *madrali* and the *yaqona* ceremony, probably stirred up by Pentecostal Church ministers who may also be the source of inaccurate anthropological reports of the existence of “magic words” to cool the heat and of “unmistakable multivocal references to war and cannibalism” (Newland, 2004: 8; Stymeist, 1996: 8). The *vakalolo* (also called *qalu* in Beqa) prepared by the *bete* as an offering for the *madrali* had no malevolent meaning or use, and it was a central part of the original rite of increase. It has been described as particularly “thin” and prepared in small amounts because the *veli* are smaller than men.³ The *dalo* (taro) and the *masawe* (cordyline rhizomes) used to be first baked on top of the *lovo* used for *vilavilairevo*, then mixed together to make a pudding. This was then wrapped in banana or cordyline leaves, tied up, and presented as a gesture of thanksgiving from the *bete levu* (high priest) to the *veli*. Everybody in the village was then welcome to consume it. Miriama

vilavilairevo as being part of a thanksgiving ceremony (Pigliasco, 2007; see also Crosby, 1988; Kenn and Arii-Peu, 1949: 26, 32; Young, 1925: 222). Analysis of the rhizomes and stems of *Cordyline fruticosa* and *C. terminalis* reveals that they contain a soluble polysaccharide composed mainly of fructose that, once baked, could be stored for long periods. The root was also baked and stored to supply carbohydrates (Pigliasco, 2007, 2009b, 2010).

³ Several accounts also mention small fish and little crabs. Two thirds of the portions are offered in two different locations on the island of Beqa: Namoliwai, where in the popular myth Tuiqalita meets Tui Namoliwai and receives the *sau* (power) of firewalking; the remaining third is brought to Narodo, the outpost of the *veli* north of Rukua, where messages are sent up to their village at the upper Namoliwai River.

Naioro, granddaughter of *bete levu* Sevanaia Waqasaqa (1866–1938), daughter of a firewalking mother and father, and briefly in the 1960s a *dauvila* herself, explains:

It is the *bete* who prepares it. To make the pudding, often a couple of pieces of *dalo* are enough, for the portions must be small. Then it is wrapped with a cordyline leaf. It does not need to be sweetened. The baked cordyline provides the sweetness to the ingredients of the pudding. Its sweet syrup extracted is just like sugar. After it is prepared, the *madrili* is announced and eating begins. (Miriama Naioro, pers. comm.)

What I find fascinating is the way boundaries have been drawn around all these phenomena—how they have been reified, conflated, and labeled. From a Christian theological point of view, it would appear unrewarding to indiscriminately place on all these phenomena the stamp of evil. Instead of finding labels for antiquities and expressions of folklore, reifying culture, we should analyze how the rise of a hegemonic state or an institution such as the church regularizes, marginalizes, criminalizes, and charges as deviant all that does not fit into its ordering categories (Kaplan, 1995; Merry, 2000).

Levy, Mageo, and Howard (1996: 15) observe that:

Gods generally represent forces of social order but are characteristically more distant from sensual experience. Their acceptance is more likely to be grounded in a doctrine of ‘faith’... Since Christianity does not provide a well-defined frame for experiencing spirits, it collapses them into a Christian [undifferentiated] demonic realm which is much vaguer than spirits’ traditional classification. So when old religions go (and with them former gods), spirits become even more unbounded, chaotic, and shadowy.

3. Ethnonational Spirit and Cultural Cleansing in Dakuibeqa

While it was Sir Arthur Gordon’s 1876 “Fiji for the Fijians” policy that planted the seed of modern Fijian ethnonationalism, according to Baledrokadroka ethnonationalist beliefs were evident well before indigenous Fijians converted to Christianity. The Methodist Church has actually morphed into a bastion of Fijian ethnonationalism, becoming a key ideological influence behind the 1987 and 2000 coups (Baledrokadroka 2009: 415–416). The series of violent and unconstitutional acts of political protest that began occurring 17 years after Fiji’s independence in 1970 shows how nationalism, in the words of Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, can be both a curse and a boon for nation building and political stability. The complexities accompanying these acts

necessitate a few words on how Fiji's religious landscape has been convulsed, starting when Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka executed two coups in 1987. In the views of Rabuka and many of his supporters, indigenous Fijian political and economic interests were threatened by the interests of citizens of Indian descent (Tomlinson, 2013).

A third coup took place in 2000, publicly led by the civilian George Speight, a 7th-day Adventist who, explains Tomlinson (2013), took Rabuka as his model in some ways. Tomlinson observes that though the coups of 1987 and 2000 seemed superficially like a moment of triumph for militant Christianity, they eventually drove many to find spiritual solace in evangelical spiritualism (Ratuva, 2002: 19, cited in Tomlinson, 2013). As Tomlinson points out, between 1996 and 2007 the Methodist Church's membership dropped to 56% of the indigenous Fijian population: "[a]lthough this is still a majority, it represents a drastic decline over twenty years."

Fiji's 4th coup, which occurred on 5 December 2006 and was led by Catholic Church-oriented Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, commander of Fiji's military forces, was an aftershock to the events of 2000. Bainimarama called it a coup to end the coup culture, "insisting that measures to 'clean up' the country and eradicate racism would set Fiji firmly on a new trajectory and end forever the bitter cycle of ethno-nationalist coups" (Fraenkel and Firth, 2009: 7). While the previous coups had "the backing of the bulk of the ethnic Fijian establishment" (Fraenkel, 2009: 45), now, for the first time, the Methodist Church became an overt and consistent opponent of coups (Tomlinson, 2013). Moreover, in Tomlinson's analysis, the suggestion that "God might curse the country," although not new, has become a leitmotif in Fijian Methodism, representing a sharp reversal of the Methodist Church's previous intimate and supportive relationship with the state. As Tomlinson observes, "[d]iscourse about curses is widespread in Fijian Methodism, both at local levels, where kin groups attempt to extinguish any lingering evil influences of ancestral spirits, and at the national level of political discourse." In this and the following section, I discuss how, according to my observations of the events that followed the 2000 and 2006 coups, discourses about lingering evil influences and alleged curses to the *vanua* have been informing both Methodist and Pentecostal narratives in the church communities of the Sawau people on the island of Beqa.

In the village of Dakuibeqa, the word *veivakasavasavataki* is commonly used to signal the end of an era, and consequently, in this case, for the banning of the *madrali* associated with the *vilavilairevo*, Methodist officials in Suva prefer to use the expression *veivakavoui vakayalo kei na veivakaduavatataki* "spiritual renewal and reconciliation."⁴ The Rev. Manasa

⁴ Jioji "George" Konrote, a Rotuman retired Major-General of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces and, from 2001 to 2006, Fiji's High Commissioner to Australia, describes Rev. Lasaro as a "systematizer of the methods he practiced. He was the first to articulate the goal of revivalism within the church in safeguarding the predominance of Christianity within the country, and a pioneer in setting out a strategy for achieving that goal and calculating its success" (Konrote, 2003: 10).



Figure 2. The Methodist church (far right) in the village of Dakuibeqa on Beqa Island
(photo by the author)

Lasaro, former General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Fiji and a key figure in mobilizing Methodist support for the coups of 1987 who participated in the 3-day-long closing of the *veivakasavasavataki*, explained to me that the whole process of reconciliation coordinated by the Methodist officials and the village pastor takes place during two to three months of Bible readings, fasting, repentance, and prayer. The process culminates in a 3-day seminar attended by the chief, all the leaders of the church, and all the leaders of local women's groups and youth groups. In Dakuibeqa, the *veivakasavasavataki* took place between 1 October 2002 and 1 January 2003. The seminar, led by the Methodist Church's highest officials, the Rev. Lasaro and the Rev. Ame Tugaue (then General Secretary and now President of the Methodist Church of Fiji) and Dakuibeqa's former pastor Maikeli Livani, included long hours of prayer, Bible reading, fasting, and abstinence from *yaqona* and tobacco—refreshing the renewal achieved in the previous three months, repenting, and recognizing the sacrilege of performing the *vilavilavirevo* and distributing the *madrali* in the village. The Rev. Lasaro explained that the Church's role in Dakuibeqa was:

To help the people to re-look and to reflect about their traditional customs and re-existence say for instance the case of *vilavilavirevo*... I mean, that's an old belief system which they believe was given to them by their own ancestors, and part of the ritual is that they worship their own gods, the ghosts, and small people [*veli*], part of that is the process of the *vilavilavirevo*, part of that process is worship [*madrali*]... (Manasa Lasaro, pers. comm.)

The Rev. Lasaro remembered that he encountered discordant opinions among some members of the Naivilaqata clan during the closing seminar in Dakuibeqa:

[Some of them] were afraid to let go the traditional worship [*madrali*] of the small people [*veli*]... because they were afraid of getting burned [performing the *vilavilairevo*].... The church has got to look at the way in which tradition has molded the life of the Fijian people... it has to look at the darker side of the ritual and try and portray the brighter side of it... a lot of them are afraid to let go the past, they are afraid, so you need that educational process, you can't just tell them stop, you need to educate them, to actually to realize this is, this is tradition, this is myth, and this is reality. (Manasa Lasaro, pers. comm.)

An alleged darker side and curse associated with traditional customs (i.e., the *vilavilairevo* ceremony) emerges even more clearly in my interview with the Rev. Ame Tugae, who was apparently instrumental in December 2002 in orchestrating the final week of praying and fasting in Dakuibeqa that culminated with the official banning of the *madrali*.

I went there [Dakuibeqa] by the request of Manasa Lasaro and Livani knowing that in some places in Fiji, some believe, from the Methodist Church or the Catholic Church or whatever Christian denomination they belong to, they think that there are certain things or elements in life, or some kind of beliefs that are still, you know, practiced or observed within the community or society, that is the cause for them of not receiving the blessing from above, failing them to have better developments, for better civilization, they try to see where does the root of all these problems still lie, they keep on searching, searching, searching, they bring one *talatala*, another *talatala*, they try this, they try that, even in some places, they tend to put the blame on those who live there, before them, they were the cause, and the curse is still alive in that piece of land, on that area, that is the ruin in the life of their generation until today, but it's important to escape to avoid from that curse, something has to be done, some bring out the bones of those people who died, because they are the one who performed witchcraft here, they are the ones who worshipped evil spirits here, they were the ones who did these bad things and the curse falls on the ground and those who grow up on that piece of land, cannot run away from that curse, and some they dig the soil, the soil that belongs to that clan or that tribe, they dig the soil they take it to church and pray to God, they take the soil to church and pray God to bless the soil so that the soil can be forgiven, those who live on that soil at that time will have the blessing from above, the curse falls on the ground, so they bring the ground to God, in some places some they bring trees, some bring grass, anything that is on the ground, but when I came there, *veivakasavasavataki*, means the cleansing or sanctification in English, I told them if you want to try reconciliation to God, true sanctification, true cleansing, don't bring the bones, don't bring the soil, don't bring the earth or any other creation, take you, yourself to Jesus Christ, your lord and savior, because you are the most important creation, of all the creation. (Ame

Tugaue, pers. comm.)⁵

The Rev. Tugaue's narrative combines the two key elements of "curse" and "soil," a combination becoming more and more recurrent in the ethnographies of anthropologists who conduct fieldwork in Fijian rural communities. When a man in his 20s with a slightly bruised back lies in bed all day, numb, unable to walk, Katz remembers the refrain he had been hearing over and over again in the village: "There is sickness in the land" (Katz, 1993: 251). Arno wrote that in Lau "an important associated belief is that many misfortunes and illnesses are the direct result of misdeeds.... *Lega*, misfortunes of all kinds, are linked to social control through this system of supernatural punishment" (Arno, 1993: 32). Newland (2007: 307) speaks of "healing the land," the evangelical projects "to eradicate social ills." Similarly, Becker (1995: 112) observed "the relocation of illness" in the community of Nahigatoka, manifested in misfortune, failure to thrive, odd adversities, and suffering attributed to supernatural forces. Tomlinson (2002: 248) observed how in Tavuki, when people look for the source of their difficulties (ill health, unhappy family situations, or lack of desirable employment) they "often turn to the past. Specifically, non-Christian ancestors are blamed for 'cursing' the present." More recently, Tomlinson reports an interview in which the Rev. Tuilovoni explained that soil needs to be cleansed ritually for several reasons:

Humankind was made from soil, as stated in the book of Genesis. Second, in the old days, when Fiji was cannibal country, much blood was shed; spilling into the soil, the blood made it 'filthy' (*dukadukali*). Third, he noted that if someone wanted to practice 'witchcraft' (*vakatevoro*), he could pour kava onto the earth. (Tomlinson, 2009: 138)

These rituals of atonement and apology are emblematic of what Tomlinson calls the "culturally generative" confrontation between *lotu* (Christianity, embodied in the form of the Methodist minister) and *vanua* ("the land" in the form of the chiefly system, plus the ancestors' potency located in the soil), an interactive friction where in the end the former claims supremacy by bringing light to the darkness of heathenism (Tomlinson, 2002: 248, 251), mostly through the confession of the sinners:

All of them [Dakuibeqa people], they confessed, they take it to themselves that they are also

⁵ Given the importance and sensitivity of the subject, I decided to include long, verbatim quotations from my interviews. I have chosen to avoid paraphrasing or heavily editing the material, for I believe these lengthy quotations are important for the readers' sense of what is actually going on.

sinner, the chief [the Tui Sawau, Ratu Timoci Matanitobua], the chiefly clan, the *bete's* clan, the spokesman's clan, they also know that they have their weakness, their problems to confess about, so that's why, the chief confessed to all of them, this clan confessed to the chief and the clan, they all confessed to one another after everything was done, we all went to the church to confess to God, all to confess to God, who is the head of all the clans. (Ame Tugae, pers. comm.)

The Tui Sawau, Ratu Timoci Matanitobua, explained to me that he participated in the *veivakasavasavataki*, along with the whole village of Dakuibeqa, because the community interpreted it to be the desire of his brother, who he had been suddenly called to replace⁶:

I think this [the idea behind the *veivakasavasavataki*] was after my brother [former Tui Sawau, Ratu Peceli Vitauditoga] died, but before he died I think him and *talatala* Livani, they had a talk regarding this, it's not only regarding the *vilavilavevo* but the whole community, what our forefathers did and because they [Ratu Peceli and the Rev. Livani] were saying that our kids were not doing well in school and they thought it was a curse for the village because what our great-great fathers did, so they proposed for us to do the cleansing [*veivakasavasavataki*]. So after he [Ratu Peceli Vitauditoga, Tui Sawau] died we decided to fulfill that wish. (Ratu Timoci Matanitobua, Tui Sawau, pers. comm.)

After the Sawau people cleansed their past deeds and present beliefs during the 2002–2003 *veivakasavasavataki*, the *vilavilavevo* ceremony obtained the *bene placet* of the Wesleyan Church:

As long as they [the firewalkers] believe it's a gift from God, reinterpret, re-label, re-examine what they've been doing, and perform the present practices in the light of the scriptures. (Manasa Lasaro, pers. comm.)

The reconciled *vilavilavevo* ceremony appeared to comply with the morals of the wider Fijian community and the Methodist ethnonationalist focus on reinterpretation and renewal rather than removal. In other words, a particular strain of Fijian nationalism within the Methodist church was interested in having the ethnic Fijian community maintain authority over its own socio-cultural affairs. Konrote (2003: 12) observes that the Rev. Lasaro appeared to be especially interested in saving the nation, based on the new political implications that he gave to his revivalist sermons in Fiji.

⁶ Ratu Peceli Vitauditoga passed away in July 2002.

The determination to tie religious identity to ethnonationalism as tightly as possible, of which Tomlinson speaks (2009: 166), emerges clearly in the Rev. Ame Tugaue's account of his trip to Dakuibeqa back in 2003:

[During the *veivakasavasavataki*] I tried only to relate where can we see the *vilavilairevo* in the Bible.... There was once in the Old Testament when the three people, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego... (Ame Tugaue, pers. comm.)

The Rev. Tugaue's analogy with the Biblical prototype of the ordeal by fire is in fact deeply instilled in Fijian consciousness (see also Kaplan, 1995: 8–9). Brewster (1967 [1922]: 258) reported having met some Sawau clan members in the 1870s who told him “they quite understood how Meschec [sic], Shadrach, and Abednego survived the ordeal, and this too is another coincidence between Fijian and Biblical traditions.”

This parallelism between Beqan firewalkers and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walking through the fiery furnace of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has become a hoary leitmotiv in church sermons and in the cultural education provided to tourists by hotel emcees. In a similar context, Toren (1988: 696) has argued that the appropriation in Fiji of Leonardo da Vinci's “The Last Supper” implies “both a subtle transformation of the present and a revelation of the past.” It is clear from the transcripts of my interviews with church officials that the banning of the *madrali*, or, better, its transmutation into a prayer to God, is the same sort of transformation. The use of the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follows the same pattern illustrated by Toren (1988: 696, 1999), instantiating Fijian tradition and transforming it without denying historical change or doing violence to tradition.

Similarly, according to Tuwere, the *mana* concept “bridges the gulf between *vanua* and *lotu*: the former with its focus on place and the image of the sacred, the latter with emphasis on time, conversion, and change” (Tuwere, 2002: 136, 137); likewise Tomlinson (2009: 137), referred from Tavuki: “God gives all the *mana*.” Insightful also is the perspective of the Rev. Savenaca Vuetanavanua, who wrote his thesis at Davuilevu Methodist Theological College on the relation of *vilavilairevo* to Christianity, under the Rev. Ame Tugaue's and the Rev. Ilaitia Tuwere's supervision. Interestingly, his wife is related to the Naivilaqata custodians of the *vilavilairevo*. I asked how he relates tradition and gospel in this case:

You cannot allow the *vila* [*vilavilairevo*] to stand alone, you should allow the *vila* [*vilavilairevo*] to be part of the tradition. Holistically, you have to include all parts of tradition, like some sort of a knot that just ties them together, which leads up to the *vilavilairevo*. The Fijian word that I'm using is *mana*,

if you want to follow *mana* you can place *mana* in every Fijian ceremony, I see *vilavilairevo* as another manifestation of *mana*. *Vilavilairevo* is good for this community [Sawau]. We have to see *mana* in relation to other Fijian effects on the tradition, that's the *mana* of *vilavilairevo*. (Savenaca Vuetanavanua, pers. comm.)⁷

Upon his return to Fiji in 2010 after two years in New Zealand, the Rev. Vuetanavanua told me that his thesis had received very positive comments and his position has not changed: *vilavilairevo* is good for the Sawau community and the *veivakasavasavataki* has proven to be a successful one. He often uses this example in the theology classes he teaches at St. Henry's Church in Suva. On a last note, as we watched the President of the Methodist Church, the Rev. Tugae, slowly walking up the stairs of the Methodist Church's headquarters in Suva, the Rev. Vuetanavanua added that there are major concerns among Methodist Church officials about the radical evangelicalization process dividing families and villages in Fiji.

4. Spiritual Enrichment and Cultural Debasement in Rukua

If deploying "big guns" like Lasaro and Tugae, who defend tradition but blame the past, clearly indicates the defensive approach of the Methodist Church in the face of the progressive evangelicalization of Fiji, the Pentecostals' attitude is offensive, a "frontal hand-to-hand combat, what they call 'spiritual warfare'" (Casanova, 2001: 437). The Pentecostals landed in Fiji in 1926, and after the Second World War they became Fiji's most dynamic, fastest-growing Christian movement (Casanova, 2001; Ernst, 1994). The largest and most affluent denomination, the Assemblies of God (AOG), shares an orthodox understanding of the Scriptures within the mainstream of American evangelical-fundamentalists who believe in the Trinity and practice baptism by immersion.⁸ Robbins (2003: 222) observes that Pentecostals everywhere are leading "an unabashed, uncompromising onslaught against their local cultures."⁹

Evangelical scholar Kenton Sparks observed that evangelicals perceive the Bible as a kind

⁷ The Rev. Vuetanavanua met Prof. Paul Geraghty and Prof. Asesela Ravuvu for advice in December 2004.

⁸ AOG was founded in 1914 at Hot Springs, Arkansas. The early founders were licensed white ministers of the Church of God in Christ, the largest African-American Pentecostal body, founded by Charles Harrison Mason in 1897.

⁹ The term evangelical comes from the Greek word euangelion, meaning "the good news," or the "gospel." The evangelical faith focuses on the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. While both the Assemblies of God (AOG) and Christian Missionary Fellowship (CMF) are regarded by their ministers as Pentecostal Christian denominations, like other evangelicals they adhere to the belief of the inerrancy of Scripture. At the same time, they place great emphasis and focus on some things that evangelicals would either reject or downplay; these include baptism in the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and other gifts of the Spirit, and miracle healings.



**Figure 3. The Methodist church in the village of Rukua on Beqa Island
(photo by the author)**

of lens through which one looks at life. However, he argued that “the lens metaphor fails because it imagines the Bible as an instrument insulated from the world observed through it,” whereas “the meaning of Scripture, as of all texts, is dependent upon its cultural and historical context” (Sparks, 2008: 327–328). While Fijian Methodism reinforces, in its way, the communally oriented moral system, supporting the subordination of the individual to the traditional community (Brison, 2007: 42, 46), the Pentecostal Churches in Fiji provide ways to imagine new kinds of communities, replacing tradition with the idea of individuals as autonomous and as parts of a global Christian community (Brison, 2007: 57; Kray, 2002: 410; Robbins, 2003: 222).

In the village of Rukua on the west coast of Beqa, in February 1961, Peceli Vitukawalu, the firewalking impresario of the Sawau people (Pigliasco, 2007, 2010), called upon his schoolmate Alipate Cakau, at that time president of the AOG Church in Fiji, to heal Peceli’s father’s blindness. Peceli’s father’s temporary recovery opened the door to AOG in Beqa (Marika Ravula, pers. comm.; Peceli Vitukawalu, pers. comm.). Alipate Cakau’s work in Rukua started questioning the established Methodist church and supporting more individualistic interests: the salvation of individuals, the health of individuals.¹⁰ However, the arrival of AOG in Rukua did not stop the Rukuan *dauvila* from signing the first contract with a hotel in 1961,¹¹ hosting a major *vilavilavirevo* ceremony for Prince Charles in 1974, and taking a contingent of Rukuan firewalkers overseas to the University of Hawai‘i’s East-West Center and the Polynesian Cultural Center on

¹⁰ The successful work of the AOG Church in Rukua is also mentioned in Lawrence R. Larson’s *The Spirit in Paradise: The History of the Assemblies of God of Fiji and Its Outreaches to Other Island Countries Throughout the South Pacific* (St. Louis, Mo.: Plus Communications, 1997).

¹¹ Korolevu Beach Hotel, 30 km east of Sigatoka, whose arson burning in the 1980s allegedly occurred as a result of a land dispute.



Figure 4. Peceli Vitukawalu holding the picture of Prince Charles (second right) on his visit to Rukua on 12 February 1974. Also visible are Peceli himself (first right) and Fiji's Deputy Prime Minister Ratu Penaia Ganilau (first left) (photo by the author)

O'ahu in 1976 (Pigliasco, 2007, 2010).

The spiritual focus of the Rukuans shifted again after an inter-denominational para-church organization called Every Home for Christ (EHC) arrived in Fiji in 1984 (Ernst, 1994: 92).¹² After EHC had worked closely for a time with both the Methodist Church and the Assemblies of God, the Methodist Church withdrew its support and excommunicated EHC and all its members and supporters. Despite the Rev. Manasa Lasaro's attempts at chiefly and governmental levels to stop all EHC activities, in 1990 EHC formed its own church, the Christian Mission Fellowship (CMF), a "Christ-exalting, prayer-focused, Bible-based, and Church-centered"¹³ Pentecostal denomination with over 60 churches in Fiji and a growing number of adherents (Manasa Lasaro, pers. comm.; see also Ernst, 1994: 93).

Like AOG, CMF arrived in Rukua after a miraculous healing. Ponipate Balanagasau was "healed instantly" (Watisoni Kovei, pers. comm.) after a stroke when his son brought him to the World Harvest Centre in Kinoya, Suva ten years ago.¹⁴ Ponipate's healing provoked

¹² Originally founded in 1946 as "World Literature Crusade" in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, Canada, its first chairperson in Fiji was Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, a Fijian politician who allegedly took part in the Taukei movement and in the 1987 and 2000 coups (see Ernst, 1994: 92).

¹³ CMF International website: <http://cmfi.org/whoweare/our-core-values>, accessed 28 October 2011.

¹⁴ Similarly to the AOG's temporary healing of Peceli Vitukawalu's father's eyes, Ponipate's leg worsened again days after the healing.



Figure 5. The Assemblies of God (AOG) church in the village of Rukua on Beqa Island (photo by the author)

unprecedented factionalism in Rukua, larger than with the advent of the AOG Church in the 1960s. While CMF counts today more than 150 people, over half of Rukua's population, the AOG Church in Rukua currently has fewer than 20 families following the strenuous work of the Rev. Marika Ravula, a native of Rukua and a former *dauvila* himself, and of associate pastor Rev. Inoke Biuvakaloloma.¹⁵ CMF gradually decimated the Rukuan *dauvila* by eliminating their income-generating performances (Pigliasco, 2007), forcing the few left to hold their occasional performances outside the village's boundaries at the old settlement of Naduruvesi. During my last visit in July 2010, Mika Tubanavau had just finished organizing a private *vilavilairevo* ceremony, the first in four years, for a Welsh television crew. Twelve *dauvila* from Rukua, all Methodist Church members, participated under the supervision of 63-year-old *bete* Isimeli Tone.

The ceremony actually took place during a 3-day Healing Crusade organized in Rukua by the World Harvest Centre, which sent 1,000 loaves of bread to feed a crowd of nearly 500 people, mainly from the neighboring villages of Nawaisomo and Raviravi, and a crew of 25 people including CMF's young gospel singer Nasi, her father the Rev. Aporosa Bosewaqa, and a 4-member band. My boat from Navua to Rukua left only after a long delay caused by waiting for all the people arriving from Suva along with 500 loaves of bread. When I got to Rukua, Nasi, wrapped in a tight red *sulu*, was already rehearsing her hit, *So na gauna* ("Sometime"). The next day, I had the chance to meet the Rev. Watisoni Kovei and his associate pastor, the Rev. Asesela Lalanabaravi. According to the Rev. Kovei:

¹⁵ The population in Rukua in July 2010 was 265 people including children and infants.



Figure 6. The Christian Mission Fellowship (CMF) church in the village of Rukua on Beqa Island (photo by the author)

CMF is a Pentecostal Church, when they [villagers] convert they become born again, they have to repent of the old ways. Reaching out to the people like in the village we have to accept the Fijian protocol, *vanua*. CMF follows some like traditional links with the *vanua* but we didn't partake in some other parts of culture that you know differ from the ways of belief or faith in what the word is, like we didn't take grog, we don't take *yaqona*, but we respect the chief you know, we have to do community work, we still link with our relatives you know, work together, live together like in this village [Rukua]. What happened last night it's just a pattern of worshipping God with the releasing of his spiritual gift to the preacher, it's a gift of faith or healing, signs and wonders, miracles take place, we got testimony of that. In the village of Nadroga they were going to the NLTB for their lease land from 2002 until the pastor prayed for them. The next morning there is a call from Lautoka, NLTB for them to go pick up the check, thousands of dollars, that's very amazing. It was very special last night because we were praying for long time for these things, I've been here for 8 years, for 8 years I was praying for that, every day, we want to see the move of God, we want to see people, 500 people [came last night], just hearing the word, people from 7 of the villages [in Beqa] attended last night, one woman walked from Naceva, down to Naiseuseu by foot from there to here, every night we had to feed them with 10,000 slices of bread for three nights, the question is who convinced them to come forth like last night? That's a miracle, you know. (Watisoni Kovei, pers. comm.)

Mika told me that after the July 28th *vilavilavirevo* ceremony, the Rev. Kovei and his associate pastor the Rev. Asesela Lalanabarabi even visited the ceremonial site, praying away the

curse. As the Rev. Kovei explained to me:

When I arrived in Rukua 10 years ago people in Rukua were facing lots of problems, there was lots of curse behind the problem, my predecessor [the Rev. Anare Lovobola] found out that there is a curse in this village like men in their 40s and 50s were dying. Die young. There is a curse because the people in this village, their elders used to worship witchcraft, a foreign god to kill people. I think some people are still doing this. We tried to pray the curse, pray for them in the word of God. The Methodists ignored it, we [CMF] know how to cure the curse, how to break the curse, what's the root cause, the course of the curses, what's the source of the curses, the main root, why is it happening, today the curse is still in some people's life, we still try to reach out to them, show the damage, sickness, death, divorce, fornication. They used to feed the *veli* with small fish you know, in Naceva and Dakuibeqa they're still practicing *vilavilairevo*. They're still worshipping the *veli*, they go to church on Sunday but they don't know what's the difference worshipping God and worshipping foreign gods! We're trying to stop also that. If they want to make *vilavilairevo* [to make money] they should use other sources rather than *vilavilairevo* because they'll curse us, it [*vilavilairevo*] doesn't come from God, it comes from the devil. We have to train people to work, how to survive using time, their talents, their gifts and the wisdom from God. You have to look at the root cause, *wakatu*. I don't believe in that ability [*vilavilairevo*] if you knew the root cause. If I testify to him [a *dauvila*] what is the root then that's his own problem because I'm not telling [the *dauvila*] what to and what not to do. I just preach the word, he [the *dauvila*] has got the right, the will, the yes and no is from his side. He'll be accountable for his life. Maybe he'll make money but he'll jeopardize his future, his life, I don't believe in *vilavilairevo* as a money maker, or what else. The root is where it comes from, where was the beginning of that, here are other ways [to make money], weaving mats is not from the devil. Our forefathers used *masi* [bark cloth] for clothing, I'm planting *masi* now, make *masi*, get money, sell it, it's a gift from God. (Watisoni Kovei, pers. comm.)

In the words of Christian and Missionary Alliance evangelical Pastor David Fitch (2005: 28), "perhaps most disturbing is the way we evangelicals are attracted to big numbers." The Rev. Kovei's words echo those of the Rev. Suliasi Kurulo, founder and president of the Christian Mission Fellowship and Chairman of the Benny Hinn Crusade in Fiji. Some Christians view money as a form of power to be used well or badly; others instead have exercised suspicion towards theological justifications of any financial possessions (Stackhouse, 2000: 411, 416). Reaching out to "unreached people groups,"¹⁶ the Rev. Kurulo, like the Rev. Kovei, regularly mentions money, success, and entrepreneurship in his sermons.

¹⁶ Promotional video available at http://wn.com/Rev_Suliasi_Kurulo.

While the Christian Mission Fellowship parades globalism, its focus on numbers, large institutions and bigness is probably rooted in the American values of freedom, equality, modernity, and economic efficiency; meanwhile in the traditional Fijian way of life “business” remains something often proclaimed “antithetical to things of the vanua” (Tomlinson, 2004: 191; see also Toren, 1999; Williksen-Bakker, 2002). What the Rev. Kovei is denying is that in a traditional Fijian social organization the relation between division of labor and kinship is still pertinent, and it has nothing to do with business the way CMF sees it. In Fiji, certain specialists, descendants of a particular clan, may be called upon because of their fame to practice outside their village (Pigliasco, 2007, 2010; see also Sahlins, 1962). In Beqa, the descendants of the bete clan are considered experts in firewalking (*dauvila*): their job indicates a full-time specialization whose disappearance—according to Ro Mereani Tuimatanisiga, sister to the current paramount chief Tui Sawau, and to members of the Naivilaqata priestly clan of the Sawau *yavusa*—would cause the whole Sawau society to suffer.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to reflect on the social tensions shaking the Sawau community. At the same time, I have tried to analyze critically whose cultural views and values are being privileged or debased, by whom and why, inviting the anthropologist to blur the lines between theory and practice, ultimately seeing our collaborators and their communities as our main audiences.

In particular, I have tried to reflect on how the Fijian Methodist Church’s ethnonational approach is a ramification of the shaping of Fiji’s colonial order. The processes of local conversion were not fixed but flexible even then, indicating that local practices were being reinterpreted (see Kaplan, 1995: 75). On one hand, indigenous practices and local motivations have been politically evaluated and opportunistically subsumed by Methodist Church officials in the processes of conversion. On the other hand, the Pentecostal denominations are actually those that currently conform neatly to the old colonial model of enforced order, insisting that elements that do not fit within their structures need to be removed, not reinterpreted.

More serious are the recent developments that have swept the villages of Dakuibeqa and Rukua, driven by unprecedented competition between the Methodist and Pentecostal churches. Emblematic sermons in the villages of Dakuibeqa and Rukua focus on the present and the future, disregarding, denying, and disbelieving the past (Miyazaki, 2000: 37). Aspects of the *vilavilavevo* ceremony—which has been sensationalized by the colonial administration, pardoned by the Methodist and Catholic missionaries, and guarded generation after generation

among the Naivilaqata priestly clan of the Sawau people—have recently been censured and pilloried as belonging to one of the last bastions of indigenous heathenism. Under a new skin, the surviving ritual performance is destined over time to bend to the point of denying its implicit inner normative cultural codes. From an etiological point of view, the excising of the *madrali* from the *vilavilairevo* ceremony undermines the whole syntax of the ritual by depriving it of its semantic meaning, mutilating the beliefs of its actors and leaving them abashed and ashamed of their cultural heritage.

Two decades ago, when I started collecting ethnographic material on the traditional custodians of *vilavilairevo*, I recorded “*Sere ni Vila*” (a song of firewalking) by Rukuan firewalking impresario Peceli Vitukawalu, which has this lyric: “*sa gauna ni lotu eqo e sega ni malumu mai kaukauwa tikoga Tui Namoliwai*” (Christianity did not reduce the power of the little people of Tui Namoliwai). In the past ten years, while Fijian Methodism has allowed a wide range of reordering strategies and reinterpretations, Pentecostalism has stigmatized a whole community, denying its members their own agency in safeguarding tradition and forcing a sectarianism that is splitting what Sawau people call their *na bula vakaveiwekani* “kinship way of life.” In both cases, denominational politics of demonization in Beqa are forcing the actors to free themselves from a demonic past by not repeating it, accelerating the profound sense of loss (Tomlinson, 2009) and throwing the community into a possible existential anxiety (*nuiqawaqawa*) produced by a sense of sinfulness and sin.

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