

# Growing hope: Island agriculture and refusing catastrophe in climate change adaptation in Fiji

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**Abstract:** In both media and policy, climate change is broadly framed as the promise of catastrophe for small island states such as Fiji. This framing is often used to attract adaptation investment in islands, the targets and directives of which are frequently market-based and oriented toward economic-growth development models. In Fiji, this takes the form of land tenure policy and efforts to attract investment to support agricultural modernization. Such a pattern is the source of scholarly and activist critique that climate change adaptation is nothing more than a repackaging of neoliberal development. This paper seeks to situate such critique alongside parallel attention to climate change adaptation practices emerging from alternative, hopeful frames and aimed at less national development driven efforts. In doing so, it centers adaptation as a space of unsettled struggle and asks, in what ways do climate change adaptation practices in Fiji align and conflict with dominant framing of island vulnerability and climate catastrophe, and how might they suggest alternative adaptive interventions that renegotiate these frames? Specifically, this paper focuses on efforts to promote ‘traditional’ agriculture throughout Fiji as an endogenous and hopeful form of adaptation, and one consistently opposed to efforts at agricultural modernization as an adaptation strategy.

*Keywords:* climate change adaptation, hope, Fiji, small island states, sustainable agriculture, vulnerability

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## Introduction

The islands of the Pacific are often said to exist on the front line of climate change (Chandler & Pugh, 2021; “Pacific Islands”, 2018) — a claim which is consistently leveraged by the heads of Pacific Island states to position themselves as leaders in the field of climate change adaptation (SDG Knowledge Hub, 2019). Fiji’s nascently democratic government has deployed these two frames since at least 2014 to attract climate change adaptation investment for sustainable development (Wyeth & Stünkel, 2021). The Cyclone Winston disaster, juxtaposed by Fiji’s leadership on the Paris Agreement, is a clear exhibition of this trend (Cuff, 2016; Di Liberto,

2016; Voiland, 2016). This positioning reached a peak with Fiji's selection as the first Small Island Developing State to preside over a Conference of the Parties (COP) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) for the COP23 conference in 2017 (which took place in Bonn, Germany, as Fiji did not have the capability to host locally). Emerging from this selection was the publication of the *Climate Vulnerability Assessment for Fiji (CVA)*, a joint effort between the Government of Fiji and the World Bank (Government of Fiji, 2017). The report was meant to mark a decisive turn in Fiji's development planning and investment future. At the heart of the *CVA* is the intention to orient all development around the objective of climate change adaptation to secure what is constructed as an uncertain but threatening ecological future for the archipelago.

Several scholars on climate change adaptation argue that the framing through catastrophe, such as that in Fiji's *CVA*, sets a hopeless imaginary and presents the vulnerable as homogeneously at risk and without capacity to act autonomously for adaptation (Chandler & Reid, 2016; Paprocki, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2010). This fatalism and homogenization of vulnerability is emphasized in the case of islands (Field & Barros, 2014; Pelling & Uitto, 2001). Critical island studies scholarship has sought to challenge this framing by foregrounding the plurality of adaptation strategies and centering the perspectives of islanders on climate change and how it should be addressed (Perumal, 2018; Petzold & Ratter, 2019; Walshe & Stancioff, 2018). These challenges build from foundational work in island studies that argues for the importance of identifying particular social and economic aspects of community risk and vulnerability apart from a monocausal environmental event (Lewis, 1990, 1999). This perspective challenges dominant policies and programs for adaptation which are structured predominantly as standardized interventions and are often re-instantiations of neoliberal sustainable development models, in so far as they prioritize strategies such as creating markets for ecosystem services and decentralizing responsibility for risk management to the community or household (Ciplet & Roberts, 2017; Fieldman, 2011; Paprocki, 2018; Taylor, 2014). These types of interventions often fall under the label 'blue growth' in the case of Pacific Islands, which is typically characterized as various efforts to marketize ocean conservation (Caswell et al., 2020, p. 775; Bennett et al., 2021). The merit of this critique is emphasized by the fact that key development institutions, such as the World Bank, label climate change as both a burden and opportunity in a way that repositions climate vulnerability as a site of untapped productivity or accumulation (Watts, 2015).

Drawing from work on resilience, a concept central to climate change adaptation, this paper adopts a perspective that aims to think about adaptation as an unsettled "object of inquiry" (Walsh-Dilley & Wolford, 2015, p. 174) that must be understood in specific social contexts instead of presumed as a self-evident or predetermined process. In this way, the paper is in conversation with work in island studies which seeks to center local perspectives (Philpot et al., 2015), and local responses to climate change and adaptation (Clarke et al., 2019; Petzold & Ratter, 2019) — specifically that which troubles island imperilment (Kelman, 2018) — as well as on work in critical development studies which highlights the unintended and unanticipated outcomes of interventions (Pigg, 1993). More specifically, in Fiji, adaptation should be considered as a process entangled with politically significant representations and invocations of

vulnerability; namely, representations that often build from an imperial history of constructing the archipelagos of the South Pacific as fundamentally remote and naturally at risk. These representations largely justified the original interventions of colonial rule, as the images they served to conjure set the region's tropical islands as locations of escape and adventure, and, most fundamentally, as territories of incivility requiring civilizing intervention. This pattern of colonization thus followed broad norms rooted in Eurocentric presumptions of *terra nullius*. However, occupation of Oceania was also uniquely legitimated through legal norms of *aqua nullius*, which configured waters as unpossessable, rendering indigenous claims to archipelagic landscapes moot in large effect (Bongiorno, 2016; Crosetto, 2005; Marshall, 2017; Wolfe, 2006). This history, and this specific aquatic geography with which it was entangled, roots forms of contemporary resistance which foreground the centrality of the ocean and the significance of the oceanic expanse to claims of regional autonomy (Fair, 2020; Gabrakova, 2018, pp. 189–196; K. Teaiwa, 2018).

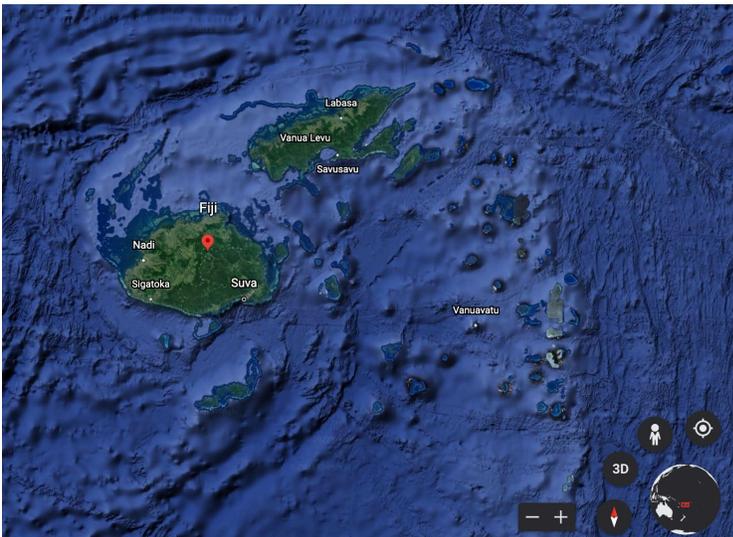
Although the dynamics of representation, systems of knowledge, and modes of action made possible have shifted since colonization, an image of the South Pacific islands as isolated, vulnerable, and idyllic has persevered amidst broader climate change discourse (Chandler & Pugh, 2021). The repetition of such representations works alongside a similarly shared site of intervention in both colonization and dominant modes of climate change adaptation, namely the land and its productivity. Development-focused modes of adaptation in Fiji often follow upon scholars' fears that adaptation is nothing more than neoliberal sustainable development — specifically, sustainable modernization of agriculture to fit the imperative of economic growth through sustainably industrializing one of Fiji's largest economic sectors.

However, this is not the only story of adaptation in Fiji. This paper seeks to situate merited critique alongside adaptation practices that are framed through hopeful and agentic forms of representation. This effort emerges from research which asks, in what ways do the various practices of climate change adaptation in Fiji align and conflict with dominant framings of island vulnerability and climate catastrophe, and how might they suggest alternative adaptive interventions that renegotiate these frames? Specifically, the paper focuses on efforts to promote 'traditional' agriculture throughout Fiji as an endogenous and hopeful form of adaptation, and one consistently opposed to efforts for agricultural modernization as an appropriate strategy.

The case is built from two months of ethnographic research during 2017 and again in 2018, as well as short- and long-term research in Fiji since 2006. Data collection involved participant observation in combination with semi-structured interviews with a range of actors in Fiji's agriculture sector, including government agency staff, farm-business owners, food system entrepreneurs, and environmental and development NGOs. This exploration is not suggesting that a simple and pure alternative is offered by these non-dominant modes of adaptation, and recognizes that, in so far as these efforts build on practices that are invoked as 'traditional', there is a certain naturalization of Fijian identity that threatens to recuperate historic tropes, glossing over the exclusionary politics that demarcate who and what counts as 'Fijian' (Lawson, 2012). Thus, modes of adaptation focused on 'traditional' agriculture are explored for their ability to represent an alternative development paradigm, but also for their potential to rely upon and

enforce other troubled forms of representation, and to extend neoliberal governance by devolving adaptive responsibility to small-scale producers instead of the domestic state or international community. The paper ultimately argues that these efforts offer a perspective on climate change adaptation as an important site of struggle over both island representations and futures, and, although not pure alternatives, are valuable for the way they focus attention on those practices that seek to democratize decisions about what form climate change adaptation should take.

The first section seeks to root this argument by discussing the dominant frames of vulnerability that have long governed intervention in the South Pacific, and how these are recuperated with the same apolitical and ahistorical registers when they emerge in global discussions of climate change. The next section specifies the way these frames interact with specific adaptation strategies in Fiji, namely sustainable modernization of agriculture and related policies of land use and access. To begin a discussion of alternatives, the following section introduces the ‘traditional’ and organic agriculture movement taking shape in Fiji to present both the difference of frame- and land-based practices from which the movement is predominantly composed. The paper concludes by cautioning any presumption that the actors and practices that make up Fiji’s emerging ‘traditional’ and organic agriculture sector are either homogenous nor perfectly inclusive and democratic. Instead, I offer three vignettes with the hope of echoing the dialogue they represent and its effort to address how and in what ways climate change adaptation might be more just and inclusive.



**Figure 1:** Map of Fiji. *Source:* Google Earth.

### **Climate change and representing vulnerability**

Fiji, like many states in the South Pacific, express that they have contributed among the least to global greenhouse gas emissions, yet are set to face many of the consequences stemming from climate change (Government of Fiji, 2017). The archipelago is made up of over 330 islands and atolls totaling 18,000 km<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 1). Roughly 110 of the islands are inhabited, with most of

the population of 889,953 people living on the two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Extreme weather events involving floods and tropical cyclones already present a significant source of risk to the country. There is a level of uncertainty about the future of tropical cyclone trends, but most models indicate that climate change will intensify these tropical storms, as well as result in increases in heavy precipitation (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in press). This poses a significant threat to Fiji's population as well as its agriculture-dependent economy. Agriculture accounts for nearly 15% of Fiji's GDP, while 80% of the food supply in the country is produced through subsistence production (Daunivalu, 2020; Government of Fiji, 2021). While these threats are pressing and real, it is also the case that Fiji's primarily volcanic geography and 'high island' status make it one of the least susceptible to the typically publicized constructed threats of climate change, such as international migration or complete loss of territory. Thus, it is interesting that international media attention and political discourse has often centered Fiji, framing it as imperiled 'just like' all other Pacific Islands. This observation has also been made for other Pacific Islands, such as Vanuatu (which also has 'high islands'), and in global dialogue around climate migration (Perumal, 2018).

In this way, the predominant representation of vulnerability deployed by mainstream development and aid organizations is characterized by qualities of urgent and imminent duress. Fiji's introductory profile on the COP23 website is epigraphically forwarded with Prime Minister Bainimarama's claim that: "Unless the world acts decisively to begin addressing the great challenge of our age, then the Pacific, as we know it, is doomed" (COP23 Fiji, n.d.). The imminence of wholesale catastrophe outside of immediate action clearly asserts the extreme vulnerability and imminent catastrophe that frames national climate change politics in the South Pacific — particularly in relation to compelling foreign investment and aid (Webber, 2013). This narrative is repeated in promotional materials and public communication following on from COP23, such as the short 29 second video released in concurrence with the One Planet Summit in Paris (COP23, 2017). The video is as vivid and emotively compelling in imagery as it is in script. It begins with a shot off the bow of a small motorboat traveling through slight fog near the coast of an unidentified Pacific Island. A woman's strong, insistent voice cuts through the ominous music with the claim: "There is a sense of urgency in the Pacific." As the frame shifts to the voice's owner, confidently disposed, she continues, "because every day in the Pacific, people suffer the impacts of climate change." The scene soon shifts again to another unidentified woman who offers a concise rejoinder: "We need to act now; it's about the urgency of the situation." The video ends with the frame filled fully by a dark wave, its telling acoustics the only sound layered atop the video's ever-present soundtrack of traumatic peril. Finally, text emerges: "CLIMATE CHANGE | It's Time for Action" (COP23, 2017).

Beyond the call for urgency — which climate change certainly demands — is the insinuation within these representations, and the documents that accompany them, that the vulnerability of the South Pacific is a natural ecological fact, instead of formed through a complex social, political, and economic history that is punctuated by colonization, capitalism, and associated extractive land uses. There is no direct discussion of the causes of climate change and where urgent action might be best directed. In other words, the socio-political cause of climate

change is overtly occluded by the very same urgency that the easily naturalized bio-physicality of climate compels. In the foreword of the World Bank's *CVA* for Fiji (Government of Fiji, 2017, p. 11, emphasis added), Fiji's Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Attorney-General and Minister responsible for climate change, writes:

As COP23 President, we understand this is *not the time to point fingers or lay blame*; we are here to listen, learn, and share the experiences of ordinary Fijians. Only together can we take on this great challenge facing humanity, only together can we drive climate action that spares our planet from the worst effects of climate change, and only together can we build resilience so that climate change does not limit Fiji's development, nor the development of any climate vulnerable nation.

The rhetoric of united action works to substantiate the dismissal of blame. It conveys the insistence that urgency demands action without critique, and that vulnerability, as a condition long natural to the South Pacific, erodes the need to evaluate the issues of complicity and responsibility in climate change (Klepp, 2018). Within this framework, climate change's historic and structural roots are of no consequence to how efforts are launched to safeguard the future. In fact, any acknowledgment of such historically and politically sited responsibility would, as these documents insist, simply induce more ecological threat to the most vulnerable.

Importantly, the frame of naturalized environmental insecurity is not new as a governance rationality in Fiji. Colonization of the South Pacific was primarily legitimated with representations of the region as a vulnerable, isolated enclave of incivility awaiting European salvation (Hau'ofa, 2008). Articulating related themes, academic debates in the late part of the 20th century relied on a categorization of Pacific Islands as lacking capacity, poor, and aid dependent (Hau'ofa, 2008). In addition to reducing the region's potential for self-determination, this discourse of vulnerability flattened both culture and ecology, ignoring the region's geographic diversity, and producing the South Pacific as a group of homogeneous island cultures (Borofsky, 2000; K. Teaiwa, 2014; T. Teaiwa, 2010). Scholars have challenged the tendency of climate change to re-inscribe Pacific Islands as all the same in shared states of vulnerability. To counter this, scholarship in island studies that posits archipelagos as fundamentally relational spaces (Glissant, 1997; Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017), where the unstable boundary between land and sea that defines island terrain, can complicate tropes of island isolation and smallness that work to naturalize vulnerability (Baldacchino, 2006; Hau'ofa, 2008; Pugh, 2018).

The focus on relational spaces and impervious boundaries which is central to decolonial island studies would have scholars resituate the geography of island states outside the frames of comparison offered by a Western, continental vantage. This reoriented perspective suggests that the characteristics of islands be viewed not as problems to overcome but, instead, as challenges to dominant assumptions about the appropriate governance of resources (private property), pathways of economic development and social change (economic growth from export and industrialization), and ideal social and political forms (the unified nation state). These perspectives are informed by an expansive body of work on Oceanic epistemology which has long grappled

with the challenge of thinking about the uniqueness of oceanic identities (Hau'ofa, 2008; Hereniko, 1994) without relying on essentializations or legitimating violent exclusions (Trnka, 2008). Moreover, the disruptions of material boundaries produced through global phenomena such as climate change highlight the importance of understanding social and environmental geography as interconnected at scales that exceed Western geographic frames that naturalize the nation state (K. Teaiwa, 2014).

Despite this work, dominant representations of climate change, and the way that they naturalize vulnerability, reproduce colonial narratives of states in the Global North as saviors (Taylor, 2014). The victim–hero dynamic presented in these representations reorients the politics of climate change itself. The specific sorts of precariousness it produces are solidified as a simple human-versus-nature binary (Swyngedouw, 2010); a binary that occludes the socio-structural causes of climate change, naturalizing its threats in a way that situates the majority greenhouse gas emitting states as redeemable in their capacity to act. This frame effaces any conversation for ecological and postcolonial justice which might instead center the South Pacific region as a leader in challenging the normative development trajectories of Global North countries. Fiji's economic dependence on development investment, however, creates challenges for politicizing any large-scale adaptation policy (Donner et al., 2016). Investments in climate change adaptation are, in many ways, driven by a modernizing imperative of economic growth through sustainable development. These models include projects aimed at the genetic modification of staple root crops, as well as large-scale drainage and desalinization projects, and, directly relevant to this paper, state acquisition of large expanses of communal land for sustainable agricultural modernization.

### **Dominant adaptation: Sustainably modernizing agriculture**

Rural development has long been a principal concern for the Fijian government, and one that hinges on issues of land tenure and agricultural productivity. The construction of threats posed by climate change and the imperative to adapt are similarly focused on the land and agriculture. Paralleling the state's focus on rural development is the fact that, much like the rest of the South Pacific, Fiji is quickly urbanizing. Currently, nearly half of the country's population resides in Suva and its peri-urban corridor. The process of urbanization in Fiji is linked to a number of factors, including colonial land tenure policy and the geography of industrial expansion (Connell & Curtain, 1982; Naidu & Vaike, 2016; Overton, 1992) — but the current government often focuses on high rates of urbanization to promote the need for sustainable agricultural development. For the past five years, state-led agriculture development has been oriented through FijiFirst's *Fiji 2020 Agriculture Sector Policy Agenda* (Ministry of Agriculture, 2014), adopted in late 2015. The policy, focused on advancing climate-smart systems of food production, was drafted with guidance from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The policy is capaciously set at “modernizing Fijian agriculture” (Ministry of Agriculture, 2014) but cites climate change and the need for increased assurances of food security as the primary drivers behind the legislation enacted under the policy. The document links a need to fully industrialize

Fiji's agriculture sector to provide security against climate change induced uncertainty through import substitution, and consistently states that movement away from subsistence production — which accounts for nearly 80% of Fiji's agriculture production — toward market-based production is paramount to securing the economics and climate change adaptability of Fiji's food security.

To achieve these ends, the policy notes the need to increase support services and link the chain of production, processing, and marketing through the pervasive development model of public-private partnerships and innovative agribusiness arrangements. There is no discussion of agricultural workers or how the increase of agribusiness through large holdings will primarily exacerbate rural to urban migration which is, in large part, driving low land-based productivity. Moreover, such efforts ignore work on the possibility for climate change adaptation to be strongest for small-scale producers operating with more diverse and flexible production strategies (Currenti et al., 2019). The heavy involvement of the state and the economic imperative for growth linked to the discursive and urgent demands of climate change adaptation mean that the dominant mode of adaptation is much like the historic trends of economic development. Specifically, efforts are focused on actions such as import substitution, concentrating on industries with large existing private-firm control such as dairy, rice, and sugar. Second, to increase the presence of large-holding agriculture on a countryside dotted with small farms, the state must negotiate with Fiji's colonially imposed system of formal land tenure which, like many post-colonies, combines forms of communal inalienability with systems of private property. Most important is the fact that the inalienability of land means that many farmers and farm businesses work under lease arrangements, which have often been criticized as a limitation on development and investment due to low security. To deal with these factors, and in association with the Agriculture Sector Policy, the FijiFirst government adopted a new decree to establish a Land Bank under which new Land Use Units (LUUs) can secure large-scale and longer-term leases.

The Decree gives the LUUs, housed within the Ministry of Lands, the authority to assume and lease both State Lands and Native Lands (Land Use Decree, 2010). For land to be leased through the LUU system, it first needs to be designated. If the land's designation is approved by the Prime Minister of Fiji, it is then entered into the Land Use Bank. The designation of land under the LUU is a fuller release of authority over land by the communal landowners — specifically, the indigenous *mataqali* often referred to as the Land Owning Unit (LOU) — than what occurs in the preceding leasing regimes. Under the LUU, the Director of Lands is given full discretion over structuring the purpose and nature of a lease and, unlike the former system, no consent on the part of the land occupants is required (Land Use Regulations, 2011). In addition to reducing indigenous authority over land use, the LUU also fails to increase land security for the most disenfranchised. The LUU leasing regime, built upon Indo-Fijian disquiet and with rhetoric of increasing land availability in Fiji, is better equipped to facilitate development and investment in Fiji from large sources of private capital. Land designated into the Land Bank is advertised to potential lessees through press advertisement and listings in *Invest Fiji* — forums that prioritize large development firms and international companies (Dodd, 2012). The application process to secure a lease is also structured so as to prioritize large-scale investment, rather than capital-insecure small farmers. Applications must contain details of the financial

standing of the lessee, the proposed rent, the intended length of the lease, the proposed use, and the intended level of development to be achieved (Land Use Regulations, 2011). Side-stepping consultation with the LOU is legitimated in terms of expediting leases.

The structure of the LUU lease is also telling. Once lands are designated and application for their lease is approved, two leases are then created: a head lease and a sub-lease. The sub-lease is the legal arrangement between the land lessee and the Director of Lands. Creation of this sub-lease automatically invokes a head lease between a representative body for the LOU and the Director of Lands. The Fijian State receives the full lease payment from the sub-lease lessee directly, and then distributes a portion to the LOU. Rent paid to the State under the sub-lease may be reset annually, while rent under the head lease to the LOU is adjusted based on 'fair market rate' only every five years (Land Use Decree, 2010). This means that the State could increase revenue earned through the lease, while the LOU is allowed to claim only market-based adjustments over set increments. Moreover, unlike in the preceding system, there are no provisions for distributing the rent between LOU members equally. Additionally, the head lease restricts all LOU authority over the designated lands, yet LOUs are still obligated to pay rates and taxes on the parcel (Land Use Regulations, 2011). Moreover, while the Fijian State can unilaterally "vary, and in all respects deal with" (Land Use Regulations, 2011) the head lease, the LOU has no power to negotiate or terminate the sub-lease. Regarding the nature of the leases, there is no public information kept on each investor. However, public commentary has revealed general disquiet on the part of many LOU members (Rawalai, 2017). Analysis of the policy's likely and real impacts has indicated the merit of this concern, revealing the way that the Land Bank works to prioritize commercial and extractive land use without necessarily providing broader economic advantage or tenure security to the Fijian population in general (Ben & Gounder, 2019; Finau, 2014; Sakai, 2015).

### **'Traditional' agriculture as hopeful adaptation**

The current Fijian government, with its focus on sustainable modernization, is not the only actor in the archipelago involved in centering agriculture as a key site of adaptation. There is a concurrent effort, inconsistently supported by State discourse and agencies, to cultivate systems of 'traditional' agriculture. These forms of production are often synonymized explicitly with organic agriculture. Although the promotion of 'traditional' agriculture is gaining public attention as an important mode of climate change adaptation, the push to support organic production as a niche industry has existed in Fiji since the 1980s. Lacking public support, a formal organic agriculture sector was slow to take shape within Fiji until the turn of the century. In 2007, two initiatives funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development took aim at the cost and administrative barriers to certification. These efforts were implemented by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), as well as a more local organization, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC). A primary outcome of these initiatives was the development of Pacific Regional Standards for Organic Agriculture Production and the eventual creation of the Pacific Organic and Ethical Trade Community (POETCom), housed within the

SPC, which is currently spearheading the promotion of organic agriculture within Fiji as well as in the South Pacific more broadly (S. Hazelman, personal communication, March 8, 2017).

Efforts to frame traditional agriculture as necessarily synonymous with organic agriculture are most often promoted as an endogenous or specifically Fijian method to produce future resilience against climate change. The possibility for economic advantages that come with certification and directing Fiji's agricultural economy as a producer of niche goods for the ethics-oriented global market are also invoked (Rawalai, 2017). Thus, the narratives emergent with this development effort are multi-sited, and, in some ways, are composed through dissonant themes, including the material exigencies of climate change, nostalgic traditionalism, and capitalist progress. Yet, all are focused in some way on constructing a catastrophe-free Fijian future that is agriculturally ideal in its traditional resilience — either economically, ecologically, or socially — through its resurrection of an unspecified notion of Fijian agrarian tradition. The website of POETCom (SPC Land Resources Division, 2011) claims:

[Organic agriculture] is not a new concept in the Pacific, it is very much the traditional farming system that Pacific forefathers practiced sustainably for centuries. Today, current farming practices in many communities are still based on 'age-old' systems that are free from the residues of agri-chemicals and where environmental integrity remains largely intact.

Public discourse, in addition to relying on claims of economic promise, is similarly engaged in leveraging the 'agrarian imaginary' of Fiji, and the more general Fijian imaginary entangled with sentiments of the pristine or essentially natural. Over 100 articles on organic and traditional agriculture have appeared in both *The Fiji Times* and the *Fiji Sun* since 2014, many of which rely on discourses of nature, redemption, and tradition in various laudatory and hopeful combinations. Below are excerpts that work to highlight general themes found throughout these pieces — pieces that are primarily letters submitted by SPC and POETCom communication staff:

There is a danger of taking the environment we are fortunate to enjoy for granted. When we do so we are disrespecting nature and the God that created it [...] Organic farming is a way of not only using the land and naturally provided nutrients for producing healthy crops. It is also a way of protecting the land and our people from unhealthy and unsustainable lifestyles. (Bhagwan, 2014)

There is a lot of evidence that is coming out now that organic agriculture is more resilient to climate change. They do not use a lot of chemicals, they do not use a lot of imports. They use local materials and they enhance the traditional farming methods, the traditional farming practices which are resilient. (RNZI, 2015)

Such narratives have been observed in the globalized commodification of other Fijian products, but their recent emergence in agriculture marks a slight shift that positions certain modes of

production as uniquely desirable for creating climate change resilience. This is divergent from public discourse throughout and about Fiji that has chronically regarded ‘traditional’ agriculture as a source of vulnerability for the goal of modernizing (Bacolod, 2014). What follows is an introduction to the Fiji Organic Producers Association (FOPA) as the newest organization seeking to formalize this shift alongside POETCom.

### **Fiji’s Organic Producers Association and three vignettes of hopeful adaptation**

The work focused on promoting ‘traditional’ and organic agriculture as a central mechanism of climate change adaptation for Fiji emerges largely from the premise that Fiji’s subsistence-based agriculture sector is an asset rather than a vulnerability. Instead of seeing this mode of production as a barrier to overcome, it is seen as necessarily resilient and an advantage to be maximized. This unified conclusion, however, is in many ways the end of homogeneity among those who laud ‘traditional’ and organic agriculture in Fiji. I observed this in 2017 when I met with and worked alongside seven agriculture business owners as they actively sought to institutionalize efforts to promote ‘traditional’ and organic agriculture in Fiji through the creation of the Fiji Organic Producers Association (FOPA). The initial FOPA meeting took place in the breezy front hall of a mid-sized organic ginger farm located an hour north of Suva along the west coast of Viti Levu. The farm is run as an overtly female-focused business and managed by one of Fiji’s foremost female entrepreneurs. The initial group in attendance was relatively small, just 11 including myself, all representing five different agricultural entities in operation across Fiji.

The range in business structure and product was relatively broad, but all were united with a focus on advancing organic agriculture in Fiji to strengthen existing subsistence-focused production models. Mere, who runs the ginger farm, began the meeting by asking a representative from each of the entities to speak about their primary interest in joining FOPA, and what purpose they hoped an Association might serve. It was quickly apparent that there was a shared interest in increasing public presence and, thus, public assistance for the everyday infrastructures necessary to their businesses. The conversation centered around a problematic of investment equity and ecological justice. Core to each entity is a variant on the philosophy that Fiji’s agriculture sector is facing an unjust burden by the threat of climate change. Moreover, that threat is identified as emergent from a certain mode of production that focuses foremost on immediate profit.

The logic of incorporating as FOPA is twofold: interested producers see a benefit in the increased political presence generated through formal aggregation; this increased presence would then help generate the public investment in infrastructure necessary to many of the entities — investment that is frequently taking a backseat, as funding focused on the more appealing investments of climate change adaptation (Baldacchino, 2018). In the following sections, I highlight three vignettes from observing FOPA meetings as well as in interviews with producers associated with the initiative. The list of interviewees was developed in collaboration with FOPA and POETCom, as well as through seeking out publicly listed registered organic producers and the use of snowball sampling to identify further contacts. The three narratives reveal the way that

conversation about traditional and organic agriculture emerges from a perspective that is consistently hopeful and aimed at strengthening production practices that are seen as endogenous to Fiji; however, they also highlight how what counts as endogenous is contested and prone to disagreement.

*Vignette one: Who represents tradition, and what counts as organic agriculture?*

The first question discussed at length at the initial FOPA meeting was, “Who gets to be included in FOPA?” The concerns voiced in response were to do with charting the boundaries of what should count as ‘organic’ production, but the dialogue moved beyond this word and discussed topics that had more to do with moral and political issues within Fiji’s food system than the specific ecology of production. The most vocal concern was regarding a new large-scale agri-food business from a group of South Korean investors that had acquired a significant amount of land under much-coveted government lease. Those in the room were concerned about the way that the FijiFirst government had so readily granted land access to a foreign firm. The disquiet expressed was not just about the foreignness; there was also overt concern about the methods used and the specific market the products were funneled toward. Those in the room were opposed to “plantation-style organics” as well as those that would be sold in *palagi* or tourist-shops in town. Other producers were mentioned with equal skepticism for similar issues, specifically a new Fijian coffee company which marketed its product as ‘wild harvested’. Many expressed disbelief that all of the beans were sourced from Fiji, and others reflected on the fact that the owner of the company was also an Australian national who had several other business investments. There were also concerns about who the products were for. There was lengthy discussion about the ideal of selling at the local markets or setting up a grocery store that was aimed at the domestic Fijian consumer. Many noted a common lament that Fijians now prefer a grocery store to the local markets. There was a suggestion to counter this by establishing a Western-style grocery store that sold only FOPA products or those produced in Fiji. This discussion was followed by a reflection on the difficulty of supporting their individual businesses while also making the products accessible.

While the discussion at the FOPA meeting was extremely cordial, two other instances emphasized the difficulty of these questions — specifically, those of what should count as organic or ‘traditional’ and what could thus be included in efforts to promote desirable forms of climate change adaptation and resilience. In interviews with a few small-scale copra producers, most were unapologetic about their dissatisfaction with existing links between the FijiFirst government and the efforts of POETCom and FOPA. One farmer noted the desirability of increased market access that comes with organic certification or participation in the FOPA network but lamented that the cost of entrance was prohibitive to producers like him. He also expressed concern that those benefiting from any increased access to organic certification were the “new colonials” with their existing large-scale export-crop farms of copra and pineapple. The opposite side of this concern was expressed by some of the formally organically certified commercial producers with whom I spoke. They were largely unenthusiastic about a need to actively support access to organic certification, and production, marketing, or processing infrastructure at the level of government.

Participants in the initial FOPA meeting spent significant time discussing one strategy of dealing with the cost and administrative barrier for organic certification. Known as the Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), the process as described by IFOAM relies on local quality assurances instead of third-party auditing. The standards are developed through participatory processes and the certifying agents are locally trained. The system functions best in shorter supply chains and can help reduce both the cost of certification as well as the increases in any farmgate cost of the product. While many producers were encouraged by the shared goal of FOPA and POETCom to develop a PGS system for the South Pacific, there were two perspectives that emerged in opposition to these efforts. One detraction came from many small-scale producers focused on the domestic market who thought certification or formal appraisal of their production was unnecessary and likely to have little effect on their ability to sell their produce locally. Instead of certification, many of these producers preferred efforts focused on support for infrastructure to facilitate distribution and processing. Additionally, larger businesses, many of which were already certified, lamented what they feared would be a diluting of the standard by making it more accessible. Over the course of the three FOPA meetings that followed, members agreed to focus on developing a PGS system which FOPA could administer — a decision which emerged from the conclusion that this system would allow autonomy over the certification process, and the possibility to prioritize local conditions and concerns. The group did not define these specific conditions but developed a shared set of values that should drive certification practice: assuring affordable products, continual government lobbying, promotion of knowledge sharing, leveraging bargaining power against larger producers, a focus on the local market, and a goal of diversifying locally available staples. The discussions within each meeting convey the ways in which the organization comes together through a process of compromise. Instead of unanimous agreement about standard principles of organic or traditional production, the group's work is best described as a continual struggle over the moral ideals of climate change adaptive agriculture in Fiji.

*Vignette two: How to support inclusive and hopeful adaptation*

It was Saturday: market day in Suva. Lota moved through the congested streets with a languid resolve. I hurried to match her steady pace as we wound our way toward the bus station at the heart of the city. There were at least three stops we had to make along the way. Each needed to be quick if we were to be on time to the second FOPA meeting set for that afternoon. Despite this constraint, our movements and conversation were never rushed. Lota, a self-described social entrepreneur, is a primary figure in FOPA, and acts as a core link between POETCom and the Association. This position relies heavily on her network of organic and traditional agriculture producers throughout Fiji. With both Australian and Fijian roots, Lota finds it relatively easy to negotiate with Australian funders and aid organizations, as well as the eastern Fijian island communities where she spent half of her childhood.

Lota founded her own social enterprise in 2015 with the broad aim of expanding the use of organic farming as a means of sustainable income generation for outer island communities in Fiji. Given her family connection on the eastern islands, this is the location where she's begun her work, but the hope is to expand efforts across the archipelago. Her enterprise takes advantage

of existing systems of communal production on the islands; Lota's principal role is applying for funding and coordinating infrastructural investment for processing products. She also provides the key link to broader markets in Fiji and the South Pacific. Lota is self-conscious about the success of her work relying on the marketing discourse of an intrinsic indigenous Fijian ecological connection, as well as the fact that the principal buyers are from Australia and New Zealand. Her goals in working with FOPA are aimed at a domestic market for organic products so that the producers with whom she works are no longer dependent on this sort of branding and international distribution. Her vision of how this is done is to focus both on shifting public perception and on increasing access to markets for the producers like those with whom she works.

Lota's hope lies in stewarding climate change resilience through a more formal link between Fiji's urban consumers and outer island producers. The work she's undertaken was inspired, she often notes, by a lot of experience with what not to do. She is emphatic that climate change adaptation not adopt the same community development models that have been struggling to take form in Fiji's rural communities since the 1980s. There are several stories she tells about the sort of project model that does not work; these are mostly investments in infrastructure that ignored both local social and political realities and include things such as arbitrary roads and maintenance-demanding biodigesters. To some, her own ethos of participatory development might seem paradoxical against the bleak ethnographic landscape of social enterprise work. She is, however, not sanguine about this, and acknowledges a fundamental difference between three decades of donor-funded community and sustainable development projects and the efforts aggregated under FOPA, where her objectives are primarily a long-term commitment to a place instead of a specific model of intervention or pathway of funding.

Lota's work is a single example of several efforts by well-positioned Fijians to cultivate a more vibrant and locally focused food network throughout the archipelago. These efforts are not typically repetitions of standard sustainable development projects, but often, as Lota insists, significant in the way they seek to break from a donor-driven funding model of quick, short-term interventions. They also often combine efforts for market access with broader initiatives for political and moral shifts about what form public investment should take; namely, those focused on building local, small-scale production and moving away from universalist notions of plantation and commercial efficiency.

*Vignette three: What is the appropriate role of the government in adaptive agriculture?*

Beyond organic certification, discussions of how best to support traditional agriculture in Fiji are predominantly focused on increasing public investment in both infrastructure and extension support services. Among most producers I interviewed, there was an insistence that that increased access to markets was central to their future success. Access was mostly described as an issue of information; of not knowing which products were most in demand or which days and which lines of sale would be the most important to pursue. When the market was invoked, it was most often in reference to domestic consumption; for many, the idea of selling abroad was either already their predominant mode — and, thus, the issue was how to make locally focused sale more profitable — or an economically desirable but unreachable goal for smaller producers.

There were several specific demands that consistently emerged in association with increasing access to the market, foremost being access to transportation, processing, and storage.

There are challenges presented by local market-based production on an archipelago that do not exist when transportation requirements are land-based alone. The limitations of connectivity between primary markets in Viti Levu and outer islands is an issue, and one that will likely present increased challenges with the effects of climate change (Moncada & Bambrick, 2019). Emphasizing this, most small-scale producers noted their interest in a cooperative storage or processing facility and often referenced the existence of such places in the United States. There were also frequent comments made about increasing capacity for knowledge sharing. Many noted the ineffective extension services with little public funding and those that worked through existing networks that failed to provide broad assistance to producers. FOPA members saw this as a principal strength of the Association, wherein they would be a source for knowledge sharing among each other, filling in where extension fell short — but there was also interest in pressuring for increases in extension agents and access to services, or more direct lines of communication. Relating to information, there was also interest in increasing knowledge around seed production. Extension agents typically provide limited seeds, or seeds that have more to do with proprietary interests than the interests of producers. Moreover, it was often observed that if more producers were to seek organic certification, they would need access to the appropriate seeds or seed saving techniques to allow for this. In addition, there was also interest in access to organically appropriate fertilizer and compost, or training on the production of these inputs.

The consistent expression in these gaps in inputs, infrastructure, and knowledge bring up the slight disjuncture between the narratives that organic production already exists across Fiji's small-scale producers, and that formalizing it through certification is the only challenge to strengthening this sector. These comments also highlight consistent interest in public investment and a commitment to the appropriate role of the government in agriculture as providing those services that are unaffordable to individual producers. Accordingly, FOPA's work since 2017 has been focused on communicating these points.

The current political context and public discourse in Fiji provides a fascinating update on these efforts. In early 2019, the FijiFirst government launched efforts to promote what they referred to as 'backyard production' but which might be better understood as subsistence production. This was done through public messaging and the distribution of seeds and other inputs, as well as through a series of training workshops. Most recently, following the significant economic devastation stemming from COVID-19 lockdowns, the FijiFirst government has increased its enthusiasm for 'backyard production' as a key traditional source of resilience. There has been consistent public messaging encouraging people to return to the land and focus on subsistence in the face of widespread job loss, as the tourist-dependent economy remains largely closed. Many of those that I spoke with in 2017 see this as validation of their long efforts to promote this form of resilience. However, there is parallel critique that this is too little too late and, specifically, that such a time of crisis is when the government should be providing more direct support instead of relying on the tenacity of those that have access to land and productive means — which is not the case for a large portion of Fiji's population.

## **Conclusion: Reframing and re-politicizing climate change adaptation**

This paper has endeavored to demonstrate how climate change adaptation in Fiji is a plural and negotiated process as opposed to a singular project. While the power relations within and between the actors and organizations involved in this process are by no means symmetrical, there are also not clear lines between adaptation as expert- and externally imposed interventions and those that are place-specific and democratic. The vignettes presented here highlight the often-overlooked space of traditional and organic agriculture in the South Pacific as a vital part of working toward effective and socially focused climate change adaptation. Moreover, while this work is not homogenous, there are shared features that reveal a hopeful orientation of climate change adaptation. First, the actors and projects working to promote organic and traditional agriculture through FOPA are overtly political in a way that other climate change adaptation projects are not. The Association's members aim to highlight the uneven causes — rather than just consequences — of climate change by identifying culprits, namely conventional modes or plantation-style agriculture, as well as the economic models and political systems that benefit and drive this mode of production. Moreover, those actively promoting traditional and organic agriculture offer a different understanding of small-scale or subsistence producers not as essentially vulnerable, but as capable of acting on the world and able to demand security from the effects of climate change.

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