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Enhancing Oral Tradition in Fiji for the Study of Archaeological Remains. The Case of the Hillforts in the Nadroga-Navosa Province

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The Fiji Islands offer a compelling case for cross-cultural research integrating archaeology and oral tradition. Fijian society still practices oral transmission, preserving diverse stories with cultural significance. Many legends and beliefs are tied to past settlements, considered sacred due to their symbolic role. In June 2022, fieldwork in Nadroga-Navosa (Viti Levu) as part of the Environmental Changes and Heritage in the Fijian Islands project, explored hillforts and oral traditions through archaeological surveys. Findings from sites like Tabuqutu and Old Tau reveal that landscapes and remains are deeply embedded in local memory. Stories of origins, place names and beliefs about hillforts as ancestral homes highlight the enduring role of oral tradition in shaping historical knowledge. This paper presents these findings, emphasizing the value of oral tradition in interpreting archaeology within Fijian society.

KEYWORDS: oral history, oral tradition, Fiji Islands, archaeology, Pacific Islands, hillforts

Fidžijski otoki so posebej zanimiv primer za medkulturne raziskave, ki združujejo arheologijo in ustno izročilo. Fidžijska družba še vedno ohranja ustno prenašanje znanja, s čimer ohranja raznolike zgodbe s kulturnim pomenom. Številne zgodbe in verovanja so povezane s preteklimi naselbinami, ki so zaradi svojega simbolnega pomena pogosto obravnavane kot svete. Junija 2022 so v okviru projekta Okoljske spremembe in dediščina na Fidžijskih otokih na območju Nadroga-Navosa (Viti Levu) potekale terenske raziskave, ki so s pomočjo arheoloških pregledov preučevale utrjena hribovska naselja in ustno izročilo. Ugotovitve s krajev, kot sta Tabuqutu in Stari Tau, kažejo, da so krajine in arheološki ostanki globoko vtkani v lokalni spomin. Zgodbe o izvoru, krajevna imena in verovanja o utrdbah kot predniških domovih poudarjajo trajno vlogo ustnega izročila pri oblikovanju zgodovinskega vedenja. Prispevek predstavlja te ugotovitve in izpostavlja pomen ustne tradicije pri interpretaciji arheoloških podatkov v fidžijski družbi.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: ustna zgodovina, ustno izročilo, Fidžijski otoki, arheologija, pacifiški otoki, utrjena hribovska naselja

INTRODUCTION

The Pacific islands provide an ideal context for examining how oral memory – whether in the form of oral history, folklore, myths and legends, or traditional knowledge – can yield valuable insights into local history, population movements and territorial occupation. This perspective complements archaeological data and fills gaps where primary sources are lacking, either due to the absence of written records from the period or because historical biases have undermined the archaeological reliability of certain territories. By contrast, oral transmission often proves to be highly effective. As we will see, when analysed with a rigorous methodology, it can establish unexpected connections and relationships while also confirming and expanding upon existing knowledge in both human and environmental history. Oral transmission also includes narratives that take the form of myths, and historiography has already recognized their potential to convey significant information – not only about past environmental events, including catastrophic ones, but also about mitigation and adaptation strategies employed by past societies. Furthermore, the analysis of oral memory does not merely contribute to data collection; as the direct voice of local communities, it also enhances the understanding and interpretation of these data.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the value of oral tradition in studying the past through a specific case study in Fiji. This analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in June 2022 as part of the IEA ECHAPH project (*International Emerging Action on Environmental Changes and Heritage in Atlantic and Pacific Hillforts*).

The project focused particularly on abandoned former settlements located in inland upland areas found across most of the major Pacific islands. Over the course of their history, it has been suggested (Kumar et al., 2006) that shifts in settlement patterns were linked to climatic changes, particularly fluctuations in sea levels. This phenomenon has been analysed by integrating archaeological survey data, excavations, geomorphological data and oral traditions. This research aimed to investigate the hillforts in the southwestern sector of Viti Levu Island, within the province of Nadroga-Navosa. The project is part of a well-established field of research seeking to shed light on this lesser-known aspect of Fiji's prehistory, which predates European colonization but not the Lapita phase. The study also aimed to clarify several unresolved issues, such as the chronology and mode of site occupation, the classification of site typologies to identify settlement patterns, the relationships and potential conflicts between sites, and the social and hierarchical structures associated with them. Furthermore, it sought to understand how these hillforts serve as indicators of broader societal transformations, potentially mirroring environmental changes, and to assess the role of anthropogenic factors in these dynamics.

Data acquisition relied on non-intrusive methods, including surveys and oral inquiries. The primary objective was to create a catalogue and a map of fortified sites – an essential first step in the study of hillforts – highlighting which locations deserve further archaeological investigation, identifying key research challenges, and proposing an interpretative model. Integrating oral tradition into this research was indispensable, as it allowed for a

fuller understanding of the archaeological findings.[1] Oral narratives (*talanoa*) and legends (*tukuni*) provided crucial insights into the topography and history of the sites that would otherwise remain unknown.

This paper will demonstrate how oral tradition remains deeply embedded within traditional Fijian communities and continues to be the primary vehicle for transmitting knowledge related to land connections, identity issues, and traditional expertise. We will argue that a holistic and multidisciplinary approach offers the most promising methodology for research in regions where communities maintain an intangible yet significant historical connection to their ancestral landscapes – one that may not always be immediately perceptible through Western scientific frameworks.

PART 1: CHRONOLOGICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

The Fiji Islands are a volcanic archipelago located in the southern Pacific Ocean. The two largest islands are Viti Levu, home to the capital Suva, and Vanua Levu.

Fiji was first settled by humans around 1000 BC by Lapita voyagers, who migrated from Papua New Guinea, moving west to east and eventually populating most of the Pacific Islands. The Lapita culture is primarily *an archaeological construct* (Kirch, 1997: 13), defined by a shared material culture, particularly dentate-stamped pottery.

Following the first archaeological excavations conducted by Gifford (1951), a chronology based on ceramic typology and radiocarbon dating was proposed by Green (1963) and later refined by Frost (1979). This chronology defines four phases in Fijian prehistory, beginning with the Sigatoka Phase (*Lapita* – 1100/100 BC), characterized by the presence of decorated Lapita ceramics. The initial date of this phase has been widely debated, as it corresponds to the first Lapita settlements. Early archaeological research suggested dates around 2950–3050 cal. BP (Clark, Anderson, 2009). However, more recent studies indicate that the earliest Lapita site should be Bourewa, dated to approximately 2866–2771 cal. BP (Nunn, Petchey, 2013), while Matanamuani on Naigani Island dates between 3070–2770 cal. BP (Irwin et al., 2011). This was followed by the Navatu Phase (100 BC–1100 AD), marked by carved-paddle impressed ceramics, as well as ceramics with incised, appliqué and other surface modifications. The Vuda Phase (1100–1650 AD) saw a decline in paddle-impressed ceramics and an increase in incised, appliqué and finger-pinched surface decorations. Frost also associates this phase with the appearance of fortifications on Taveuni. Finally, the Rā Phase (1650–) is characterized by more complex incised and appliqué patterns, as well as a wider variety of ceramic forms, reflecting increased contact with Europeans.[2]

[1] Following a paradigm applied in other studies, see for example Nunn, 2019.

[2] However, it is important to note that these periodizations have been reassessed in light of new excavations and recent studies on pottery. A good summary can be found in Cochrane, 2018.

The 1300 event and the Hillforts

The study of ceramics reveals a shift in population movements during the post-Lapita phase, while maintaining connections between groups (Cochrane, 2018). These movements are also evidenced by petrographic analyses of ceramics (Dickinson, 2006).

A period of significant change occurs around 1300 AD, when a combination of factors leads to transformations in settlement patterns and subsistence strategies. Patrick Nunn's studies indicate that around 1300 a climatic shift occurred (Kumar et al., 2006; Nunn et al., 2022), characterized by a drop in sea level during the transition from the Little Climatic Optimum to the Little Ice Age. This change, accompanied by tropical cyclones, droughts, and disruptions to the marine ecosystem, forced local populations to seek new resources and adapt to a different way of life.

Coastal settlements, which had been characteristic of the previous phase, were no longer sustainable, making it necessary to detach from marine resources. The subsequent crisis led to conflicts, societal breakdown, territorial and resource competition, and ultimately warfare. Beyond environmental factors, Field (2004) also highlights the impact of socio-economic phenomena such as population growth and social stratification, which led to the emergence of chiefdoms. These newly established political entities quickly sought to consolidate control over territory and resources. As a consequence, settlement patterns changed and people moved inland and upland (Field, 2005), to ensure better protection and to be closer to new sources of subsistence.

Studies reveal the widespread emergence of fortified sites, some located near agricultural resources, while others – likely serving as refuges – were situated on mountain peaks or ridges (Field, 2005). Additionally, many settlements were associated with rockshelter caves, which may have played a crucial role in food storage (Nunn, 2012a), while others were linked to lookout points (Nunn, 2013). The spread of hillforts, particularly during periods of environmental stress between the Little Climatic Optimum (LCO) and the Little Ice Age (LIA), with peak phases around 1400–1500 and again around 1700 (Nunn, 2013; Field, Lape, 2010), reflects a phenomenon observed throughout the Pacific region. Between 1600 and 1700, new groups arrived from the north of Viti Levu and from Tonga (Kumar et al., 2006). Towards the end of the Vuda phase, there was a gradual return to the lowlands, yet European travellers' accounts from the 19th century still describe ongoing conflicts and the continued presence of settlements on hilltops (Nunn, 2012b).

The study area

The situation in the Sigatoka Valley, as highlighted by Field (2003), appears to reflect the general trend in which settlement patterns are influenced by environmental changes. Our research, conducted at selected sites in the province of Nadroga-Navosa, aimed to confirm or challenge this hypothesis. We draw attention to some unresolved issues that the selected hillforts were intended to shed new light on: some sites appear to have changed function and the extent of their occupation over time; others seem to be linked – perhaps occupied by the same people for different purposes or during different periods; some were likely part of the same network; others are difficult to date; and some had long-lasting occupations but were only used occasionally. This area was particularly promising due

to the high density of elevated sites conducive to fortification, and, above all, because no archaeological research had previously been dedicated to this type of site in the region. The study of maps, aerial photographs, and toponyms allowed for the selection of several potential sites. The northern area of the province was chosen due to the hypothetical presence of sites located only short distances from one another, which not only contributed to the effectiveness of the mission but also enhanced its coherence. As we will see, these sites are interconnected, providing a representative sample. The selected sites are Tabuqutu, Kavukavu, Old Tau, Nakaro, Vasilaulau and Koromani.

PART 2: FIELDWORK IN THE PROVINCE OF NADROGA-NAVOSA – FIJI: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The oral tradition

Oral tradition is the collection of skills, knowledge, practices, stories, values and ideas that form the traditional cultural background of a society. Built up over time, this knowledge continues to be enriched by the accumulation of experiences and observations, and is passed down through oral stories, myths, legends, songs, dances and artistic representations.[3] Traditional culture, transmitted through oral means, notably contains information useful for understanding the environment and how to face natural risks.

Its potential for contributing to the development of adaptation and resilience strategies for communities was officially recognized for the first time in the Fourth IPCC Report ("Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change")[4] in 2007. Every community has its own environmental culture, which is inherently rooted in the territory, and each territory faces its own specific challenges, requiring tailored solutions. This is why traditional knowledge is sometimes an indispensable resource for formulating locally appropriate, culturally shaped solutions.[5] It also promotes an exchange where scientific data aligns with local needs and priorities, particularly in dialogue with local authorities. This exchange respects complex and formalized social hierarchies, to ensure that the early warning system is effective (Fletcher et al., 2013). Traditional culture also transmits knowledge about precursor signs that can serve as early warnings. For example, abnormal waves, unusual sounds and changes in the smell of water can act as warning indicators.[6] Oral tradition also preserves valuable expertise regarding construction techniques (such as the Fijian *bure* and the Samoan *fale*), which are more resistant to natural disasters (Campbell, 2015).

Oral tradition also preserves other categories of information. Numerous studies have shown that it can encode memories of past events (Vitaliano, 1973; Piccardi, Masse, 2007), including records of environmental crises, natural disasters and descriptions

[3] With regard to oral tradition in particular, see Kelly, 2015; Vansina, 1985; Goody, 2010.

[4] United Nations body responsible for assessing scientific data related to climate change: https://www.ipcc.ch/.

[5] In this regard, it is important to mention the recent collective work of Panda et al., 2023, which includes various contributions analyzing theoretical aspects and presenting practical case studies on the revitalization and use of traditional knowledge. In the same perspective, the works of Shaw et al., 2009, also fit.

[6] For the warning signs, see Janif et al., 2016.

of specific landforms. These accounts are often conveyed through myths and legends, which allow for the transmission of knowledge by reshaping it into a narrative form. By incorporating supernatural forces and a more entertaining surface, these stories become more accessible, comprehensible, and easier to remember (Barber, Barber, 2004).

Research has demonstrated that, when subjected to rigorous analysis, certain myths reveal detailed information about natural phenomena, complementing geological data. The use of oral tradition as a methodological approach to studying the environment, disasters and historical changes has been successfully applied in the Pacific. By integrating oral traditions with archaeological and geological data, scholars have reconstructed events such as volcanic eruptions (Lancini et al., 2023; Cashman, Conin, 2008; Blong, 1982) and long-term processes, including shoreline changes and sea level rise (Nunn, Reid, 2016; Nunn, 2018).

Oral tradition, particularly in societies that have not developed writing, also serves as a repository of historical memory. It plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage transmitted over time, which forms the basis of collective identity. As Vansina states (Vansina, 1985: 119, 224), the transmission of oral tradition contributes to the stabilization of collective culture: every personal acquisition is absorbed and integrated into the shared heritage of transmitted customs. Furthermore, memory studies support the concept of collective memory. Halbwachs' research (Halbwachs, 1950), in particular, explores the ways in which a community constructs and communicates a shared vision of the past, highlighting the role of places and objects as vectors for preserving collective memories.

As demonstrated by the long-standing tradition of historiographical studies in the Pacific, the analysis of oral histories preserved within tradition proves to be a valuable and indispensable tool for historical reconstruction. These narratives preserve memories of genealogies, voyages, migrations and inter-village relationships (Tuimaleali'ifano, D'Arcy, 2023).

Moreover, this approach has the advantage of supporting an *emic* perspective on history, in which oral traditions provide an insider's representation of culture and society (Mercer, 1979). When applied with the necessary precautions and the rigor of historical methodology (Curtin, 1968), this perspective can contribute to a more faithful reconstruction of the past.

Fortunately, the Fiji Islands present favourable conditions for exploring the oral tradition, since Fijian society still retains many contexts where the oral transmission of knowledge is practiced. Before the European colonists' arrival in Fiji, writing did not exist, and oral transmission and memorization were the only tools that ensured the maintenance of cultural traditions. Nevertheless, in some areas, traditional culture has been preserved through various means: the high cost of medical care makes traditional medicine practices flourish, and tourism, among other things, has contributed to the preservation of crafts. Similarly, dances (*meke*) and traditional songs are now performed primarily to entertain tourists. However, the introduction of Western customs, Christianization, school education and writing have contributed to creating a new lifestyle during the 20th century, inevitably leading to the loss of many aspects of traditional culture. As highlighted by other studies, this erosion of tradition reinforces the importance of working to preserve it, and more especially the oral histories that constitute a vital part of it (Parke, 2014: 47–53). Indeed,

oral histories are a great reservoir that contains the most diverse and varied stories: stories of ancestors, stories of foundation, stories of origins and migrations, prodigious stories and historical accounts.

It is essential to take into account the caveats highlighted by Mecer (1979), who examines how oral tradition can provide historical evidence for reconstructing the past in the Pacific. Caution is needed to avoid the risks of manipulation and sociopolitical bias when interpreting official traditions, and we also need to assess the distortions that unofficial popular traditions may have undergone through oral transmission over time. This is why these sources must always be handled with discernment and the critical perspective intrinsic to historical analysis.

One significant challenge must also be acknowledged: there is a general mistrust and reluctance in sharing oral histories with researchers, partly due to past negative experiences with scholars who failed to respect traditional practices. This issue underscores the necessity for researchers to adopt an ethical methodology – one that respects the shared data and prioritizes the establishment of trust as a fundamental prerequisite.

The methodology

All these considerations led us to integrate the collection of oral traditions into our research. We sought to determine whether local communities still retained memories of their past, as well as traditional practices and folklore. Our goal was to assess whether oral histories preserved traces of the hillforts, what information was associated with them, how they connected to present-day villages, and when and how they were inhabited.

This required a rigorous methodology, building upon the foundational principles outlined by Curtin (1968). After presenting our project to the relevant institutions and obtaining the necessary permits, the involvement and mediation of staff members from the Fiji Museum became essential. They accompanied us during archaeological surveys, interviews and village presentations, helping to establish an atmosphere of trust and dialogue. Their presence also facilitated the interpretation and respect of local norms and conventions, creating an environment that was as familiar and conducive as possible for oral expression.

The interviews concerning oral traditional knowledge took place during the official presentation – which included the authorisation to visit the lands – and especially during the *sevusevu* ceremony, which is governed by a very rigid and codified protocol. It involves presenting an offering of kava (or *yaquona – Piper methysticum*) to the chief, his delegate (*headman*), the spokesman and the other leading men of the tribe (*mataqali*). The offering is accompanied by an official request to be welcomed in the village, to be able to visit the sites, and to be able to ask questions about the stories (*talanoa*) and the legends (*tukuni*). In particular, permission had to be requested from the *mataqali* who owns the land where the site is located, and one or more members of the tribe were invited to join the ceremony. The initial exchange was entirely expressed in the local Fijian dialect and according to a very precise formal language. This is one of the reasons why it was necessary for us to be accompanied in the villages by three local mediators, who guaranteed the full success of the exchanges, respect for protocols and accurate

Fijian-English translation. Culturally and linguistically grounded, they were able to ensure exchanges and translations that were perfectly accurate and appropriate.

The mediators were Saula Nagata, headman of our host village Vusama; Elia Nakoro, Manager of Archaeology; and Nikolau Tokainavatu, Field Archaeologist working for the Fiji Museum. Once the presentation was finished and the authorization received, the kava drink was prepared and while drinking it with the locals, it was possible to start the investigation. We therefore visited the village of Nabu for the site of Tabuqutu;[7] the village of Navutu for the site of Vasilaulau;[8] the village of Tau for the sites of Kavukavu and Koromani;[9] and the village of Malomalo for the Korelevu site.[10] The interlocutors were generally one or more leading members of the tribe, along with one or more individuals from the tribe that owns the land where the hillforts are located. These individuals were therefore likely to be the best holders of the information most relevant to our research. The exchanges took place in Fijian (local dialect) and English, were recorded, and subsequently translated literally through the work of the Fiji Museum. In interpreting the data, we considered the context and circumstances of each interview, the audience present, and, whenever possible, the background of the narrators. To ensure consistency and homogeneity in our dataset, we decided to present all interlocutors with the same set of questions.

During each visit, we initially followed the same set of questions, and then we adapted them based on the answers received to obtain more details. The questionnaire aimed to learn especially about two aspects of the oral tradition: 1) stories concerning the history of fortified sites; and 2) legends about traditional deities that were associated with them, checking if the inhabitants of the village still preserve them.

Here is a sample questionnaire:

- Do you know the site of …?
- Do you know its origin?
- Do you know the meaning of the name?
- Does it have any importance for you and your clan/tribe? Is it sacred?
- Is this site somehow linked to your village?
- Do you know any ancient stories related to this site?
- Have you ever visited it?
- Is it possible to reach the site? How?
- Do you know how old the site is or which generation inhabited or abandoned it?
- Can you remember if there are any pottery shards, shells or remains of walls, foundations or ditches?
- Do you know why this site was created/why people moved there/why people abandoned it?
- Do you know if this site is linked to these other sites? Are there any relationships between the clans?

[7] Where our interlocutors were T. N., I. N. and M. N.

[8] Where our interlocutors were S. L., P. N. and S. N.

[9] Where our interlocutors were I. V. and P. N.

[10] Where our interlocutors were R. T., V. R., A. T. and S. T.

- Do you know any old stories of the ancestors?
- Are you aware of any legends concerning the ancient gods (*Vu*)?
- Which is your totem god? Are there any stories?
- Which is the most frequent natural catastrophe in the area?
- Do you have any traditional way of forecasting it?
- What do you do when this happens?

The objectives of our work were always clearly stated, and the integration of traditional knowledge and oral histories was conceived as part of a reconstruction of the past, as we will discuss in section "Insights from oral tradition" below. One aspect of the work also involved tracing archaeological data through preliminary surveys.

PART 3: RESULTS

The Nadroga-Navosa Hillforts: dataset from the archaeological survey

We present below the relevant archaeological data collected during exploratory surveys at Tabuqutu, Kavukavu, Old Tau and Nakaro (Fig. 1). It is important to first outline the conditions under which these surveys were conducted: each mission was always led by our three aforementioned mediators, accompanied by local guides for each site. Adverse weather conditions frequently hindered or even compromised some of the planned explorations. We were unable to collect certain ceramic and shellfish samples; however, we managed to geolocate some of them in order to document their presence. Additionally, in many areas, dense vegetation made travel more challenging and obscured visibility of traces. Despite these difficult conditions, some data were successfully gathered and analysed.

Tabuqutu: This site is in the form of a small rocky outcropping with a flat surface at the top. To the west, the view is unobstructed and allows a clear view of the coast and the high points of Kavukavu and Koromani hillforts (Fig. 2). Significant natural escarpments defend the site to the south and east. Constructions built by the Fiji Pine Company at the top of the spur prevented any identification of archaeological remains. Only a few blocks in secondary position were identified in the eastern part, but it is impossible to know whether they came from constructions that could be attributable to the Vunda chronological phase. Extensive flattening with a bulldozer in recent times has levelled and likely destroyed almost all the remains that may have existed on the top of the spur. In the southern portion, a coring test confirmed the presence of archaeological levels extending above the level of bedrock alteration. No coal or pottery was discovered and only the presence of rare exogenous tubers could support the hypothesis of ancient human occupation. Scattered remains of low stone walls were also identified further north, outside the site along the access road, but the dating of these remains is unclear. Moreover, as the roads had been widened by bulldozers, it is possible that these structures were intended to stabilize the edges leading to steep escarpments. Apart from the information collected through local oral traditions, no archaeological remains were identified at the site.

Kavukavu: Like Tabuqutu, this site has been largely destroyed by modern development. While its overall shape – defined by natural escarpments – remains recognizable,

the interior has been completely altered and disrupted by human construction. Given that the entire internal area of the hillfort is now occupied by modern buildings, it is highly unlikely that any archaeological remains are still visible. This site serves as a clear example of the vulnerability of archaeological heritage in this province.

Old Tau: This site covers approximately three hectares (Fig. 3) and has the recognizable overall shape of a spur. Although no significant toponym is associated with it, its proximity to Kavukavu suggests it may have been part of the same fortified site. The name "Old Tau" is therefore used provisionally, in the absence of a recognized toponym identified during our discussions and surveys. The hillfort could also correspond to the old village of Tau, now located just a few hundred meters downhill to the west. During a survey conducted in the direction of Kavukavu, the route taken allowed the team to pass by this site twice. Heavy rains at the time had triggered significant sediment slides, exposing numerous pottery sherds and malacofaunal remains. In addition, several features identifiable as the remains of huts were observed along the escarpments of this small spur, positioned outside the fortifications. They were visible through the vegetation and generally consisted of stone foundations forming dwelling units measuring approximately 4 × 5 metres. When these features were identified on-site, local guides suggested they could have been hut-platforms for warriors responsible for defending the fortified settlement. This would explain their location outside the main fortifications.

The site is defended by a rampart comprised of medium-sized stone blocks. This fortification is approximately 2 metres wide, 0.5 metres high, and at least 50 metres long (Fig. 4). When viewed from outside the site, the rampart appears massive, and its state of preservation is good, making it a site of significant archaeological potential for future research. An additional survey conducted within the enclosed area revealed stone terraces, probable hut-platform remains, and a larger structure measuring approximately 5 × 10 metres. This rectangular building, with levelled walls, is positioned on a high point of the spur, overlooking the Nakaro cave. Based on the pottery sherds discovered in situ, the main phase of occupation appears to correspond to the Vunda period.

Nakaro: This cave is located below the previous site. Known to local people and the inhabitants of Tau, it had never been the subject of archaeological surveys. The team's first exploration led to the discovery of large quantities of pottery and malacofaunal remains associated with a hearth structure in one of the cave's first chambers. The ceramics are consistent with the Vunda period, like the archaeological remains on the spur. In one of the last chambers, a probable burial was also identified, characterized by bone remains on the surface, including fragments of ribs, teeth and other undetermined bones. The strong fragmentation of the human remains may reflect a disturbance of this structure by animals that entered the cave (burial or deposit?). An important sequence of archaeological stratigraphy seems to be preserved under the surface remains, offering potential for meticulous excavation. The current findings suggest the cave may have been used as a burial site, given the location of the remains in the last chamber of the cave and in a slightly elevated corner. Although no other traces of human remains were identified during our investigation, the possibility of more graves elsewhere in the cave cannot be ruled out.

Figure 1: Location of Nadroga-Navosa Province, along with the hillforts and villages investigated in the archaeological survey and mentioned in the paper. (Author Hervé Duval)

Figure 2: View of the Tabuqutu site from the west, showing Koromani and Kavukavu in the distance. (Photo Hervé Duval)

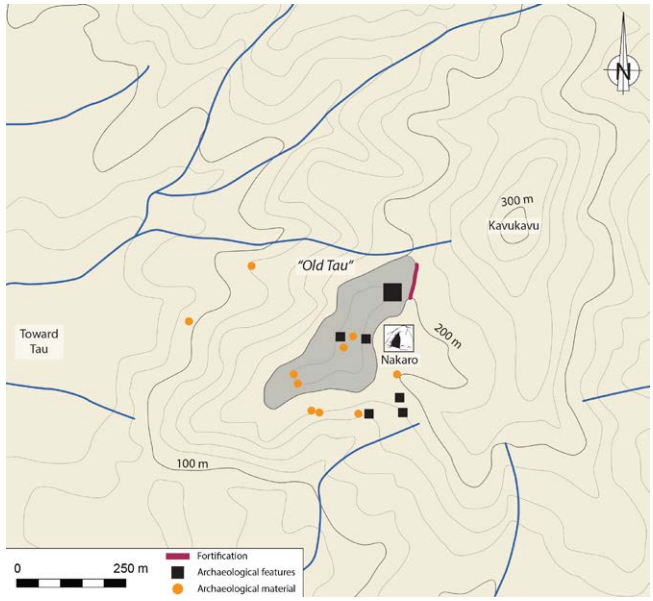

Figure 3: General plan of the "Old Tau" hillfort and the archaeological remains in the site's immediate surroundings. (Author Hervé Duval)

Figure 4: View from the south showing the remains of the fortifications protecting the “Old Tau” hillfort. (Photo Hervé Duval)

Insights from oral tradition: understanding hillforts and their history

The interviews provided some promising results. In every village, the discussions made it possible to pinpoint the exact locations of the ancient fortified sites and even trace their origins. The locals were able to describe which remains were still visible, whether the site was linked to a water source, if pottery sherds or shellfish remains could be found, and knew how to access these areas. This information proved invaluable in accessing the sites – since the routes were sometimes unclear, only the presence and knowledge of the local people allowed us to locate them. It also helped us optimize our survey time, making it easier to identify house mounds, foundations and lookouts.

Thanks to their traditional knowledge, we also learned which kinds of plants can indicate former human settlements, even where the foundations are no longer visible – as is the case with Tabuqutu, where the presence of turmeric, or with Old Tau, where the edible plant Vasili confirms past habitation. The oral enquiries revealed that a significant number of hillforts had been affected by the local company in charge of managing forest areas, disrupting the area with plantation development and bulldozing. Infrastructure built by a local telephone company also caused damage, particularly in Tabuqutu and Korolevu. This information allowed us to exclude certain sites like Korolevu from the investigation and thereby save time. However, we still visited Tabuqutu and Kavukavu to assess the extent of the destruction and, unfortunately, we could confirm that the impact had been severe.

All the villages agree that the primary reason for settling on elevated ground was warfare, and they remember the ancient hostilities between clans – for example, between those of Tabuqutu-Kutuma and Vasilaulau. This is interesting for many reasons: not only do they keep the memory of the role played by secondary settlements, but we also confirmed that the fortified sites were part of a much more complex system. These summit hillforts were also associated with slope settlements and caves – for example Kutuma cave served as a shelter for the women and children of Tabuqutu, while Nakoro cave was used by the people of Kavukavu. Such insights help interpret the archaeological remains. Another example is Koromani, considered by the Tau people as merely a temporary refuge, while Tabuqutu was the meeting place of all the 24 tribes. Moreover, local people still remember stories about the foundation of the hillforts and their mutual relationships, which helps to explain the rationale behind their locations. For example, one legend says that people from Tabuqutu wanted to find new land near the coast (fitting the model highlighted by Nunn (2011) which would date this event to around 1750–1800). To avoid detection by their enemies in Vasilaulau, they sent two women to search for new land and they distracted the other village by showing their breasts and bottoms, allowing them to pass by Vasilaulau and discover the site of Kavukavu. The entire population later migrated there as the site was ideal: it was visible from Tabuqutu, but hidden from Vasilaulau – a detail confirmed by our survey.

All the villages trace their origins back to their fortified sites, sometimes also referring to earlier locations. The founding of the modern village is closely linked to the abandonment of the fortified site, often following an intermediate stage of temporary occupation at other locations. By integrating the information collected from all the villages, it was possible to establish a relative chronology of the settlements, which appears to consist

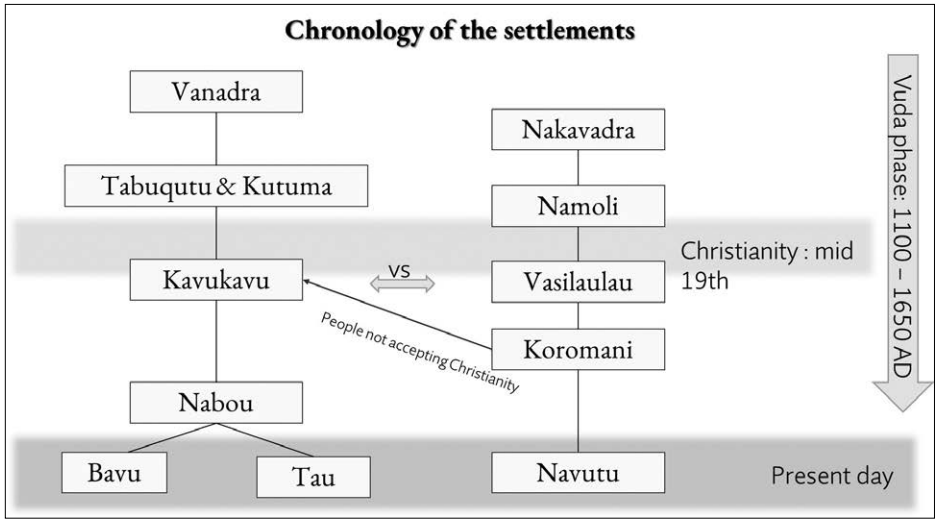

Figure 5: Relative chronology of the occupations mentioned in the paper. (Author Loredana Lancini)

of two interrelated groups. In the first, people from Vanadra moved to Tabuqutu. Later, following the arrival of Christianity and Europeans, they migrated to Kavukavu. In more recent times, they relocated to Nabou, which eventually gave rise to the two settlements of Bavu and Tau. Meanwhile, the site of Nakavadra led to the foundation of Namoli. However, with the arrival of Europeans, people moved to Vasilaulau, which was in conflict with Kavukavu. Subsequently, a group from Vasilaulau founded Koromani, while those who rejected Christianity joined Kavukavu. The present-day settlement of Navutu traces its origins to Koromani. The chronology (see diagram, Fig. 5) was established by aligning different oral histories – which never contradicted one another but rather complemented each other – forming essential pieces of the puzzle. This highlights the importance of conducting research that is both geographically focused and methodologically comprehensive.

In some cases, people were able to recall settlements from more distant periods. The inhabitants of Malomalo remember that their ancestors came from the Lau Islands, specifically from Kaba – a migration possibly prompted by the arrival of warriors from Tonga. Before settling in Korolevu, they could recall two previous settlements, Cuvu and Kaba, both named after their original homeland.

All the informers were able to link the end of the hillforts and the foundation of new lowland villages to the arrival of the Europeans and Christianity. They gave us many details about how they accepted or were prompted to embrace the new religion and customs.

The hillforts are considered sacred places – the dwelling places of the ancestors – which is why it was important to ask for permission before visiting them. Their sacredness is reflected in local etymology: Tabuqutu means “it is not permitted to set fire”. The etymology also provides other useful information: Koro means hilltop, and Kavukavu is an expression of astonishment, reportedly uttered by the two ladies sent to find a new, suitable location.

The interviews also confirmed the continuity of traditional knowledge regarding the early warning signs of potential cyclones – a major hazard in the region. Our informants affirmed that this knowledge had proven crucial on several occasions. For instance, the presence of a particular bird species (*Manmanu ni cagi*) circling the village, indicates an impending flood. Similarly, when hornets build their nests below ground level (instead of high up as they usually do), it signals an approaching natural disaster. Additionally, when small ants can be seen forming lines and climbing to seek shelter at higher levels, it suggests an incoming flood or heavy rainfall. Other indicators can also be revealing, such as an unusually abundant fruit yield on certain plants – like breadfruit – during an atypical season.

PART 4: DISCUSSION

The ECHAPH mission was conceived as an initial exploratory survey aimed at highlighting the potential of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of hillforts and identifying the most promising cases for more targeted research. It is important to acknowledge some key challenges that raise critical issues regarding the use of oral tradition, while also increasing awareness of the need to act for the protection of these lands and the preservation of oral knowledge itself. In addition to the damage caused to archaeological remains by certain local enterprises, two major issues must be highlighted. First, it is essential to be aware of potential distortions in orally transmitted narratives (Amugo, 2020). Moreover, people were uncertain about the absolute dating of the hillforts. As a result, they could only provide approximate information – for example, the people of Bavu suggested that Tabuqutu was established 4–5 generations ago, while the people of Tau were more inclined to suggest 7–8 generations, and the occupation of Kavukavu was estimated at 6–7 generations ago.

While reconstructing a chronology and attempting to determine absolute dates through oral histories is a challenging task (Nunn, 2019), the information gathered from different villages proved to be complementary and mutually reinforcing. This data can indeed provide an initial framework for understanding the history of the sites and their interrelationships. Moreover, the study highlighted varying degrees of oral memory preservation across different villages. The second issue, already noted in previous research (Nunn, 2013), is that recent historical memory is sometimes obscured by a form of self-censorship, leading people to refer to their past simply as "the age of cannibalism".

We encountered greater resistance in collecting legends about the deities associated with the hillforts. However, we were able to document the story of the two protective goddesses of the village of Tau, as well as some accounts of totem deities. Additionally, we gathered information on traditional methods of interpreting natural signs that signal the arrival of cyclones. Oral tradition has proven to be not only useful but also an invaluable tool on multiple levels. It has provided extensive information on the history of the sites, as well as more specific insights, allowing us to confirm certain paradigms already highlighted in previous research regarding site distribution and their interrelations. Some sites appear

to be interconnected, while others are independent; some were used during periods of conflict (Field, Lape, 2010; Kumar et al., 2006; Nunn, 2012a; Goff, Nunn, 2016), while others, though belonging to the same group, were employed for different purposes. In some cases, sites acquired a symbolic significance over time (Nunn, 2019).

Furthermore, while Smith and Cochrane (2011) argue that inter-site visibility is not a crucial factor, our fieldwork – supported by observations from our interlocutors – corroborates Field's findings (Field, 1998), emphasizing the role of visibility in compensating for the lack of physical defences. This aspect is likely related to the specific topography of the Sigatoka Valley.

There was also great interest and enthusiasm in sharing these stories. In several instances, interviewees expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to recall old tales, and even other community members – especially young people – joined the kava ceremony, drawn by the discussion. We understood that, while stories from the past are still occasionally shared, such occasions have become increasingly rare. Just two generations ago, elderly men would regularly gather all the children to recount these stories. Some informants even admitted that, in their youth, they took these ancient narratives for granted, only now realizing their true value. This is a clear indication of the widespread risk of losing traditional knowledge and cultural heritage, reinforcing the need for further research in this field. Developing more projects aimed at safeguarding oral traditions – while taking into account local conditions and cultural requirements – would be particularly relevant.

We believe it is crucial to emphasize the importance of supporting contexts that are traditionally linked to storytelling and dialogue. Every evening, the most respected men of the village still gather around the kava to share what has happened during the day. During our stay in Vusama village, we also shared with them the stories we had collected from other villages, contributing to the preservation and circulation of knowledge while reaffirming the connections between clans in the surrounding communities.

This also highlights the potential of oral tradition: the connections between sites and territories perceived as ancestral are still present. Promoting both the preservation and the study of oral traditions could help develop more suitable strategies, as they would be conceived and perceived as personal and locally rooted. This, in turn, could play a crucial role in safeguarding archaeological sites by providing alternative solutions when large companies need to intervene. Indeed, fieldwork has shown the high vulnerability of these sites due to modern construction and agricultural consolidation during the second half of the 20th century. As a result, several sites – such as Kavukavu and Koromani – have been significantly damaged or even destroyed by human activity. This loss of cultural heritage also deeply impacts local communities, for whom these sites hold strong emotional value, being closely tied to the memory of their ancestors, as we observed during our oral inquiries. Therefore, protecting these sites emerges as a key factor to consider for the future. Immediate actions must be taken to safeguard and preserve those that have not yet been affected by modern anthropic activities. Furthermore, referencing oral histories could also support relocation strategies (Janif, 2016) in cases where climate change necessitates such measures, drawing upon a locally embedded tradition of migration preserved through collective memory.

CONCLUSION

Our research thus demonstrates that oral tradition is not only a valuable tool for interpreting local history without distortion or imposition but also for restoring its proper value. We recognize that investigating oral tradition is inseparable from fieldwork, as these lands are still inhabited by the descendants of those who lived there in the past. These communities remain the custodians of knowledge and historical and social memory – an invaluable heritage that cannot be replaced by archaeological finds or scientific technologies. At the same time, oral tradition must be handled with caution and critical judgment and should be complemented by other data sources.

The loss of cultural heritage deeply impacts local communities, for whom archaeological sites hold strong emotional value, being intrinsically linked to the memory of their ancestors. According to the results of our oral inquiries, the populations surveyed express a strong desire to reclaim forgotten elements of their own culture. From this perspective, new participatory research initiatives and protective measures for the hillforts should be implemented.

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VALORISER LA TRADITION ORALE AUX FIDJI POUR L'ÉTUDE DES VESTIGES ARCHÉOLOGIQUES : LE CAS DES SITES FORTIFIÉS DE HAUTEUR DANS LA PROVINCE DE NADROGA-NAVOSA

Les îles Fidji constituent une étude de cas stimulante pour la recherche interculturelle combinant l'archéologie et la tradition orale. En effet, elles offrent des conditions favorables à l'exploration de la tradition orale, la société fidjienne conservant de nombreux contextes où la transmission orale du savoir est encore pratiquée. La tradition orale locale comprend des récits variés et diversifiés, porteurs de contenus précieux pour la communauté et qui méritent d'être enregistrés. Il existe également des histoires, des légendes et des croyances liées à d'anciens sites autrefois habités et considérés comme sacrés en raison de leur rôle symbolique. Leur mémoire est préservée à travers des pratiques rituelles et demeure vivante dans l'esprit des populations locales grâce aux récits traditionnels.

En juin 2022, les auteurs ont mené un travail de terrain aux Fidji, dans la province de Nadroga-Navosa (Viti Levu, Fidji), dans le cadre du projet Environmental Changes and Heritage in the Fijian Islands. Ce projet visait à étudier les sites fortifiés de hauteur ainsi que les traditions orales des populations locales, en combinant des enquêtes archéologiques et orales. Les données recueillies sur les sites de Tabuqutu, Kavukavu, Old Tau, Nakaro, Vasilaulau et Koromani montrent que le paysage et les vestiges archéologiques sont profondément intégrés dans les mémoires et croyances locales. En effet, les habitants ont une bonne connaissance des types de vestiges archéologiques présents sur ces sites. De plus, nous avons pu recueillir des récits d'origines et de fondations encore très vivaces dans la mémoire des villages, et comprendre que les toponymes sont directement liés à des éléments historiques et topographiques. Enfin, le rôle symbolique des sites fortifiés de hauteur en tant que demeures des ancêtres est profondément enraciné dans les croyances traditionnelles.

Cet article vise à présenter les résultats des enquêtes orales menées aux Fidji et à mettre en lumière la valeur de la tradition locale pour la compréhension de l'archéologie dans une société où la tradition orale constitue le principal outil de mémoire sociale.

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