

## **Assessing the Cultural Impact of the Equal Distribution Policy (EDIP) on iTaukei: A Blessing or a Curse?**

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### **Abstract**

The iTaukei, or Indigenous people of Fiji, own 91 per cent of the land and makeup 57 per cent of the country's multiracial population. Although critical in development discourses, these figures do not appear to translate into the development outcomes for the biggest landowners in the country. As it is, the 2019-2020 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) revealed that 75 per cent of those living below the Basic Needs Poverty Line were iTaukei, the highest of all the ethnic groups living in Fiji (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021). This statistic challenges the previous government's rhetoric: 'We are leaving no one behind.' In 2010, the Bainimarama government amended the Leases and Licenses Regulations of the Native Land Act (1961) to ensure equal distribution of lease money to members of landowning units (LOUs) who lease their lands. There were claims of social, economic, and cultural benefits made by the Bainimarama government that were endorsed by the iTaukei Native Land Trust Board (TLTB) to validate the amendments. This article critically examines the government's claims concerning EDIP to protect customary practices. The discussions are based on empirical evidence from a case study that examines the implications of land law literacy on village governance, political affiliations and the well-being of iTaukei in Narewa, western Viti Levu.

**Keywords:** Customary Land; Equal Distribution; iTaukei; Land Reforms; TLTB

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## **Introduction**

A decade before independence, the Spate Report (1959, p.5) highlighted the urgency to address iTaukei overall well-being with the view that 'Fijians are one element in a plural society which is stable at present [before independence], but which holds potentialities of disbalance' – a view that bore fruit in the years to come. In a cross-country study in Canada, Hall and Patrinos (2010) reported that the most significant and recurring sources of grievance for Indigenous people are those relating to Indigenous rights and claims regarding natural resources. From the literacy perspective, Boydell (2005) stated that many people do not know their basic human rights, let alone land rights.

In the South Pacific, Indigenous land issues are central to the many social complexities and development challenges in the region (Lea, 2004, p.13) manifested in Aboriginal and Maori land claims in Australia and New Zealand, respectively, negotiating access to indigenous land for development in Papua New Guinea, land reforms in the Solomon Islands and Samoa, and land lease access in Fiji. Land issues in contemporary Pacific society reflect the different expectations customary landowners and non-customary tenants have on land rights. The iTaukei, as descendants of Fiji's original migrants, are registered in the '*Vola ni Kawabula*' or (VKB) Native Land Register with the Native Land Commission (NLC), which guaranteed their position as customary landowners (Nayacakalou, 1975, p.1).

Enshrined in the 2013 constitution in s28 (1) is that the ownership of all iTaukei land shall remain with the customary owners of that land, and iTaukei land shall not be alienated, whether by sale, grant, transfer, or exchange, except to the state. In recent studies, Chambers (2016, p.16) argues that Fiji's land issue is a complex challenge driven by conflicting interests. Rokolekutu (2017) attributed the marginalisation of iTaukei landowners to colonial institutions, hindering sustainable livelihoods. Dodd (2012) criticised recent land reforms for overriding iTaukei land rights. The concept of cultural dissonance may explain the dilemma held by iTaukei landowners concerning their customary land in modern Fijian society.

Cultural dissonance, a concept derived from Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory (1957), posited that each person's mind harbours a mechanism generating uncomfortable feelings of dissonance when inconsistencies arise among attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. This study illustrates cultural dissonance through participants' conflicting views on customary land. Despite participants' high rating for customary land's identity and spiritual values, other results reveal a 'reality shift', prioritising its commercial value. In contrast, France (1969a) observed that Fiji's land tenure system results from a complex evolution, marked by simplification, distortion, and institutionalisation, often rooted in false assumptions from early colonial settlers and officials regarding land ownership.

Given this brief backdrop, this article focuses on evaluating the impact of the EDIP on iTaukei customs in Narewa Village, considering the claim made by the Bainimarama government that the policy aims to protect iTaukei culture. As part of this journal article, I will examine the implications of the policy on traditional practices concerning customary land utilisation and the perceptions of the landowning units (LOUs) regarding the policy's cultural preservation efforts.

Narewa village was selected for this study because of its distinctive geographic and socio-economic profile. The Narewa LOUs hold the historical claim as the original owner of Denarau Island before the implementation of a tenure reorganisation program known as Land Swaps in 1996. This program was initiated by the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) government led by the current Prime

Minister, Sitiveni Rabuka. As part of the land swap program, Narewa LOUs were allocated the seafront parcel of Denarau Island, which now houses major hotels in Denarau, including Sheraton Fiji, Sofitel, and Wyndham; the state land was acquired for the construction of the golf course and other infrastructure in the centre, while the freehold land consists of the residential plots for private residents on the island.

Denarau Island is Fiji's prime hot spot for tourist activities and serves as the central meeting place for tourists visiting the Mamanuca and Yasawa group of islands, which are home to most of the island tourism activities in Fiji. Furthermore, the village's strategic proximity to Nadi International Airport and the urban centre makes the village an ideal location for assessing the impacts of EDIP on iTaukei culture. Second is the economic justification of tourism lease revenue. Research on the host community's perceptions towards tourism indicates that the level of acceptance is higher when they perceive greater benefits from tourism ventures (Andereck et al., 2005). In the case of Narewa Village, one of the driving factors influencing the acceptance level is the benefits of lease revenue derived from tourism development on Denarau Island. Therefore, they provide a credible case study for gauging the impact of EDIP on the livelihoods of the people.

Lastly, the demographic characteristics of Narewa Village provide an ideal space to evaluate the impact of the policy on iTaukei culture based on age group and gender. About one hundred and fifty hotel and service employees working in hotels and services on Denarau Island are members of the landowning units from Narewa Village and beneficiaries of tourism development through lease revenue.

### **Land Ownership – A Brief History**

Early observers of Fijian society concluded that land tenure in Fiji was fluid and land rights were acquired mainly by accident of birth (France, 1969a; Hocart, 1915, p. 523). However, these parameters were often distorted by tribal warfare in which the land of weaker tribes and their chiefs were taken by victors (France, 1969b, p. 56). At this time, traditional leadership was also not static, as was the chief authority over the land. Sahlins (1981) in *Stranger Kings* showed that in some parts of Fiji, chiefs were not owners of the land but latecomers and were installed by the host community because of their physical quality and ability to command and excel in wars. Similarly, land ownership units were not homogenous throughout iTaukei society, such as with the degree of land transfer permissible (France, 1969a). For example, the tribes of highland central and northern Viti Levu resembled an egalitarian social structure compared to the stratified hierarchical system of eastern areas of Fiji and Vanua Levu (France, 1969a; Durutalo, 1985).

Collective ownership and land transfer was part of the social system, which, through reciprocity and redistribution, enabled the fair allocation of resources rather than the accumulation of wealth (Ravuvu, 1983; Overton, 1994, p.118). Social and cultural formalities often dictate land exchange between kinship and tribal groups. Like most traditional societies, Ravuvu (1998, p.127) explained that during the pre-contact era, customary land usage was characterised by *kana veicurumaki*, whereby iTaukei could utilise each other's land resources freely for subsistence. In a similar vein, Ward (1994, p.139) noted that flexibility was also attributed to population changes as it determined the landholdings of the iTaukei social grouping. Land rights were specifically about ownership, which was also residual, and usufruct. By the late 1870s, changes to the customary land tenure were inevitable due to the formality of colonisation.

## **Land Reforms Since Europeans' Arrival**

The World Bank describes the goal for land reform as an intervention in the existing landscape of land ownership, control, and usage to change holding structures, improve productivity and broaden distribution (Deininger and Binswanger, 1999, p. 249). In the context of Fiji, the initiation of land reforms dates back to the late nineteenth century with the implementation of the Torren system, which marked the transition from communal to private tenure. It was a necessity of that time for two reasons: first, to provide economic security to European settlers; second, to protect iTaukei landowners from the unscrupulous practices of some settlers (France, 1968, p. 12).

Customary land rights were reformed and codified into law by the colonial government and often acknowledged as 'immemorial tradition' (Ward and Kingdon, 2007, p. 37). The 2013 Constitution [1] and its antecedents (1970, 1990 and 1997 constitutions) have upheld the non-alienation of iTaukei land as the pinnacle of all legal documents relating to iTaukei land rights (Boydell, 2010). When Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, about 20 per cent of the total landmass of accessible, fertile land had already been taken over by Europeans (Howard, 1991, p. 27). During the same period, the Spate Report (1959, p.16) reported that Europeans claimed ownership of nearly 1,000,000 acres, over a fifth of the total area of Fiji, by extremely dubious validity. The first NLC recorded that only 415,000 acres of these freehold claims were valid (Spate, 1959, p.16). Similarly, the chiefly institution was actively engaged in alienating customary land in Fiji, unwittingly led by their vague understanding of the private landholding system (Franc, 1966, p. 20).

To stop the detrimental impact of 'land grabbing' on the economy and iTaukei society, Governor Gordon set up the Land Claims Commission (LCC) in 1875. It investigated all the lands claimed by European settlers before the Cession in 1874. To formalise the protection of customary land, Gordon set up NLC in 1880 under the Native Land Ordinance (NLO) of the same year to administrate the record and registration of all iTaukei land boundaries (France, 1969a, p.129).

The first land reforms to Gordon's land ordinance came two decades later when Governor Everard Im Thurn legalised land sales from 1905 to 1908 (Spate, 1959). The rationale for the amendment was economic and encouragement of iTaukei entrepreneurship, to develop the colony by freeing up iTaukei to work with European settlers (ibid.). The Governor further justified the new act with the view that it would provide individual iTaukei economic gains with the power to own and sell land. As a result, within two years, 104,142 acres of Fiji's best agricultural land were sold (Nicole, 2012). Im Thurn's land sales policy did not persist and was proscribed in 1909 after growing iTaukei opposition and former governor Arthur Gordon (known as Lord Stanmore) lobbied against it in the House of Lords in England (France, 1969b).

The major shift in land tenure in Fiji was marked by the arrival of the indentured labourers in 1879. As an incentive, the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) acquired the largest tract of land for sugar cane farming through the leasehold system. To protect the Indian farmers and sustain the sugar industry, TLTB was created in 1940 to act as the proprietor overseeing the administration and protection of the iTaukei customary land with the Native Land Trust Act. As the institutional tool for land reforms, control of native land shifted from native landowners to TLTB. To provide indentured farmers land access, the Agriculture Landlord Tenants Act (ALTA), the first commercial native land law designed

to lease iTaukei land, was enacted in 1966. While ALTA gave security to Indo-Fijian cane farmers, it was to become a source of political tension between political parties when the original leases

started to expire in the late 1990s (see Lal, 2009). With land becoming politicised since independence, it was no surprise the land debate caused major land reforms on customary land after the military coup in 2006. The late Savenaca Siwatibau (2002) reiterated the core principle of land reforms in PICs:

They say that land, like financial and human capital, is a factor of production, which helps drive economic and social developments, generate national income, wealth, jobs, and government revenue, combat poverty, improve the standard of living of all and ultimately entrench social and political stability in any country. Solutions must be formulated from within and must reflect national, family, and individual needs and aspirations and changing global, regional, national economic, social and political dynamics that determine our destiny (as cited in Boydell, 2010, p. 24).

### **Current Land Debates**

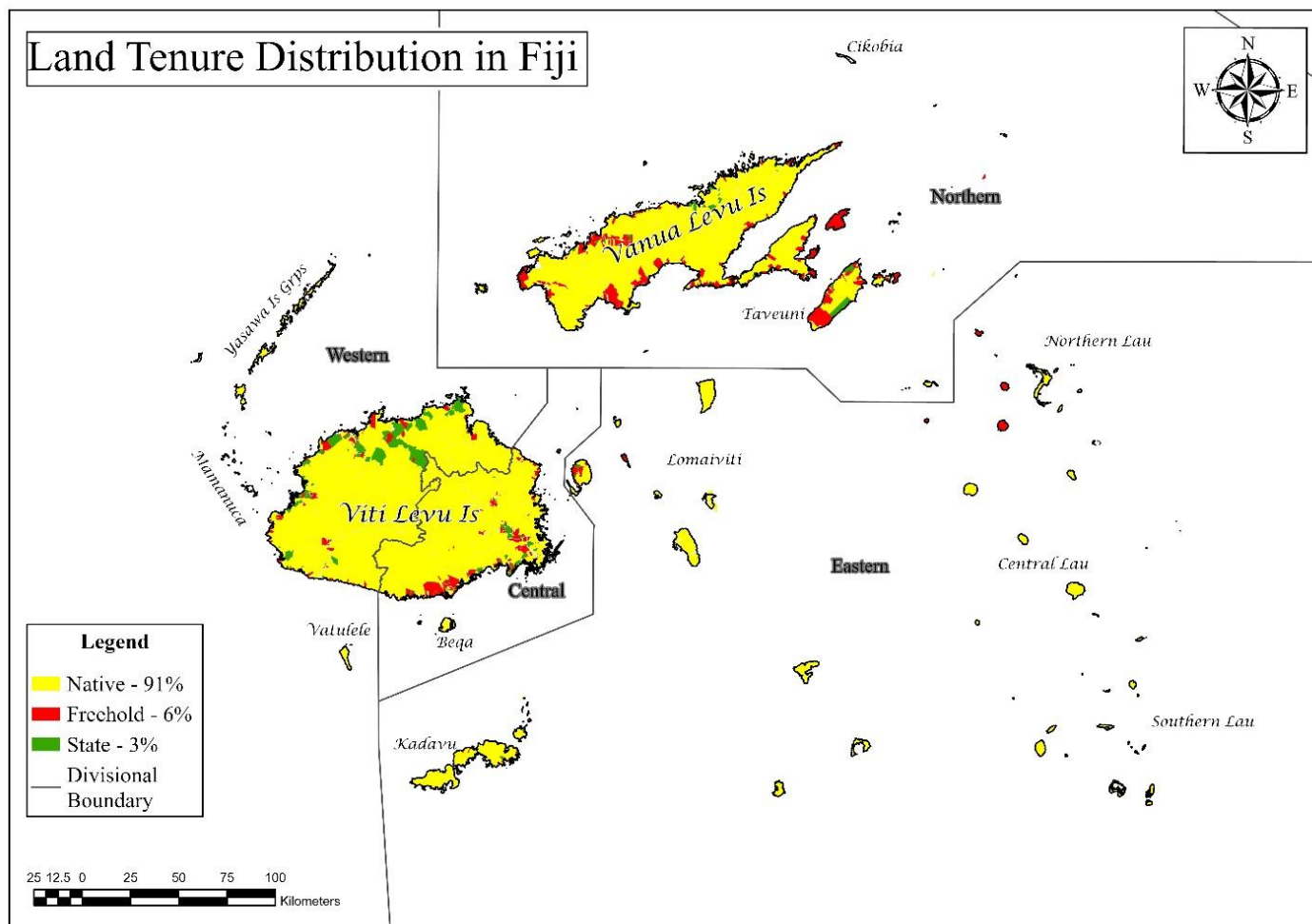
The widely publicised figure of 91 per cent iTaukei land ownership (Map 1) in Fiji is more of a political tool than a reflection of the marginalisation of iTaukei landowners from the essential means of production (see Beddoes, 2020). Also, the drastic amendments of laws concerning iTaukei affairs by the Bainimarama government from 2006 to 2022 have increased the intensity to safeguard iTaukei resources and culture<sup>1</sup>. In one report, it is estimated that 41 per cent of native land is leased out mainly to Indo-Fijians for agriculture and residential leases (Prasad and Kumar, 2016, p.122). This means that a significant portion of customary land is not under the direct control of iTaukei landowners, and they cannot fully benefit from its economic potential except for the lease revenue.

Although state and freehold land constitute around 9 per cent of the total landmass in Fiji, they are often the best land for development and agricultural production (Kurer, 2001). Freehold and state land account for much of the largest share of Fiji's land assets in the current market. In 2018, a staggering 92 per cent of all native leases were allocated for agriculture, commercial, and residential leases, with many of these tenants being non-iTaukei (Beddoes, 2020). What is even more compelling is that these non-iTaukei tenants were generating higher income than their iTaukei landlords. This data reiterates the need to thoroughly examine the native land policies to ensure equitable opportunities for landowners.

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<sup>1</sup> The Bainimarama government, for instance, suspended the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) in 2007 before terminating it in 2012. Subsequently, all GCC appointees to the Fijian Affairs Board and iTaukei Land Trust Board (TLTB) were removed through the Fijian Affairs Board (Amendment) Regulations of 2008 as noted in the Fiji Native Tribal Congress Report July 2012.

Map 1. Map of Fiji Islands Showing the Three Main Land Tenure Systems - Customary, Freehold and State Land



Source: Sakai 21 December adapted from TLTB presentation 2012, TLTB Boardroom, Nadi.

The iTaukei have land of lower quality under customary tenure (Crocombe, 1994, p. 32). On that note, Ward (1994, p.141) warned of the danger of iTaukei increasing landlessness as more native lease land would deny iTaukei rights to access and usage. Ratu Sukuna had envisioned land leasing not only to the other communities but also for Indigenous people who did not have sufficient land so his insistence that the council of chiefs must facilitate the view through proper land legislations (Scarr, 1984, p. 215).

### Equal Distribution Policy

In line with the Fijian government's 2013 constitution to create an equitable Fiji amongst iTaukei landowners, the Bainimarama government introduced the policy decision for equal distribution of lease monies via the amendment of the Native Land Leases and Licenses Regulations 2010 that became effective on January 1, 2011. The new policy completely reversed the old policy of lease money disbursement.

As it was, the old distribution allocated a large share of lease money to the different levels of chiefs within the village social structure. This allocation method was partly based on the colonial indirect rule to reward chiefs for their service (Spate, 1959, p.87; Nayacaklou, 1975, p.16). Under this old distribution, TLTB received 25 per cent (reduced to 10 per cent in 2013). The three categories of chief received the largest share of the lease money: *turaga ni vanua* (village chief) received 5 per

cent, *turaga ni yavusa* (tribal chief) 10 per cent, and *turaga ni mataqali* (clan chief) received 15 per cent. Apart from the 25 per cent poundage for TLTB, all three title chiefs would share 30 per cent amongst themselves.

In some cases, a single chief would receive the full 30 per cent entitlement because he was the holder of all three titles and belonged to the clan whose land was leased for development (see Figure 5, p. 23). The rest of the *mataqali* members shared the remaining 45 per cent. Just over a decade after its implementation, the Spate Report (1959, p.17) summed up the nature of this unequal distribution as demoralising to iTaukei within and between *mataqali*.

In opposing the amendment, the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), in its 2014 political campaigns claimed the new policy was detrimental to the sustainability of traditional obligations fulfillment as the large shares were used by chiefs to meet these obligations.<sup>2</sup> For the Bainimarama regime, EDIP was about empowering every iTaukei person. In another analysis, Sakai (2016, p. 13) argued that the old distribution policy contributed to inequality and the marginalisation of ordinary iTaukei in traditional villages, and they never questioned it because of the belief that it was an essential part of iTaukei culture (ibid.). Moreover, the bigger share was also a personal entitlement, and chiefs were not required by law to use the money for traditional obligations, though they were obliged to do so by custom. Spate (1959, p.17) expressed that such an unequal distribution of monies derived from something supposedly communal was aggravated by the fact that the welfare of the head of the *Vanua* was the prerogative undertaken by his people. It further propagated jealousy and inequality between recipient *mataqali* and those that are not.

Furthermore, the old allocation is not only the source of inequality between the chiefs and the rest of the village, but it has also partitioned the people based on gender, age, and recipient and non-recipient of the lease revenue (Sakai 2016, p. 57). It has divided the different *mataqali* in the village therefore, the social-cultural fabric of iTaukei binds them together. However, the GCC review team stated:

‘Most of our visits to the province, most [people] stated that equal distribution is not helping, it really not helping those that are leading the vanua, they are really struggling. In a sense, now that we are having equal distribution, people don’t bother about what is happening on the vanua, they have taken their share, they have gone, and all the responsibilities are handled by the chiefs.’ (Sainiana Bola, FBC News 25 May 2023.)

The sentiment challenges the claim made by the Bainimarama government in 2010 that EDIP would enhance the accountability of landowning units and leaders who leased their land.

Where considerable development has occurred, such as major tourism developments on iTaukei land it has enabled LOUs to earn an alternative source of income individually and as a group. There is a growing economic activity undertaken by LOUs who invest their lease income in other ventures (see Movono, 2012; Sakai, 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> The Coalition government is considering amending the equal distribution policy with the rationale that the policy is detrimental to iTaukei tradition. The Coalition government has repealed the iTaukei Land Trust Budget Amendment Act of 2021, also known as Bill 17, in April 2023. Furthermore, they have reinstated the GCC, which was abolished by the FijiFirst government in March 2012.

Table 1. Primary Development Leases Type on Customary Land and Corresponding Rental Incomes, as of 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023.

**TLTB - Lease Summary by Lease Type as at 30th November, 2023**

|    | LEASE-TYPE    | COUNT         | LAND AREA (HA) | ANNUAL RENT            |
|----|---------------|---------------|----------------|------------------------|
| 1  | Agricultural  | 15,700        | 172,212        | \$10,328,902.94        |
| 2  | Commercial    | 2,472         | 16,674         | \$6,190,669.37         |
| 3  | Educational   | 575           | 2,503          | \$678,337.56           |
| 4  | Forestry      | 351           | 169,354        | \$2,075,083.83         |
| 5  | Government    | 496           | 17,783         | \$2,454,992.64         |
| 6  | Industrial    | 925           | 1,065          | \$2,697,959.37         |
| 7  | Other         | 1,302         | 29,371         | \$2,761,897.52         |
| 8  | Residential   | 29,841        | 4,622          | \$13,612,795.67        |
| 9  | Tourism       | 285           | 4,123          | \$9,794,177.37         |
| 10 | Water/Mineral | 49            | 3,798          | \$405,990.12           |
|    | <b>Total</b>  | <b>51,996</b> | <b>421,503</b> | <b>\$51,000,806.40</b> |

Source: TLTB, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Comparatively, while only a small area of customary land is leased for tourism development, the lease income from international tourist operations is substantial compared to other leases (Table 1). As of November 2023, the three key development leases on customary land were residential, agricultural and commercial.

### **Research Methodology**

This article reports on the fieldwork<sup>3</sup> for PhD research on native land law literacy in Fiji and its impacts on the livelihoods of the landowning unit in Narewa, which draws substantial lease revenue from the eight hotels on Denarau Island, the tourist hotspot of Fiji (Map 2). The article focuses on the empirical data concerning the equal distribution policy and its cultural impacts. Economically, tourism-related land leases have played a pivotal role in fostering sustainable socio-economic livelihoods of the LOUs in Narewa through both individual and collective employment opportunities and small business engagements.

The study involved the triangulation of methods where the researcher collected and analysed data, integrated the findings and drew inferences using both qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study. Qualitative data from a questionnaire using both open and closed-ended questions, concerning the social, economic and cultural impacts of the equal distribution were analysed using the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Key person interviews and focus group discussions were also used to evaluate the socio-economic and cultural impacts of the equal distribution policy. Data from primary sources was collected in Narewa and Nakavu Villages, and Navatulevu and Yakuilau settlements (Map 3).

<sup>3</sup> The fieldwork was conducted from December 2019 to March 2020, and follow-up interviews were resumed in October 2021 after Fiji reopened its borders to international travellers on 17 September 2021.



Map 2. Map of Denarau Island Showing Locations of Customary Land Leases and Investors.



Source: Adapted from TLTB presentation, Yavusa e Tolu Trust, 2018

Map 3. Locations of Narewa Village with its Tributary Settlements



Source: Adapted from Google map 26 May 2021

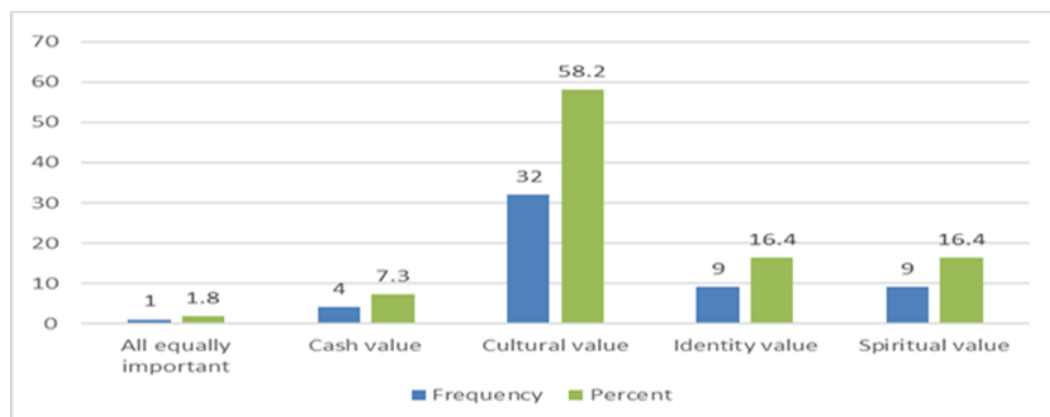
The major sources of information were gathered through multiple methods, including administering questionnaire survey to fifty-five respondents registered in the VKB, encompassing individuals from various demographic groups, including youth, men, and women. Key person interviews were also conducted with village chiefs, government officials, and TLTB representatives. Additionally, Talanoa or focus group discussions were also organised for each the three groups. The research engaged eighty-seven participants from the villages, comprising 56 males and 31 females. These participants were categorised into three groups: 32 per cent were middle-aged (aged 45-64 years old), 36 per cent were young adults (aged 18-25 years old), and 15 per cent were older adults (aged over 65 years old).

This information is supplemented by data compiled from secondary sources, including public records and official records from TLTB and the Ministry of Lands. All pertinent statistics on the population census and land tenure system were collected from the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBoS), Statistics Department of the Ministry of Lands and Mineral Resources, the TLTB and the Fiji National Archives. Subsequently, all statistical data from the administered survey were collated and analysed using the SPSS for this research. Different graphs derived from these data and thematic explanations were constructed manually from the qualitative data, particularly concerning specific land variables such as customary rights and economic benefits.

## Research Findings

### Custom Versus Economic Value of Customary Land

Figure 1. Importance place on customary land in Narewa village ( $n = 55$ )



Source: author, December 2019.

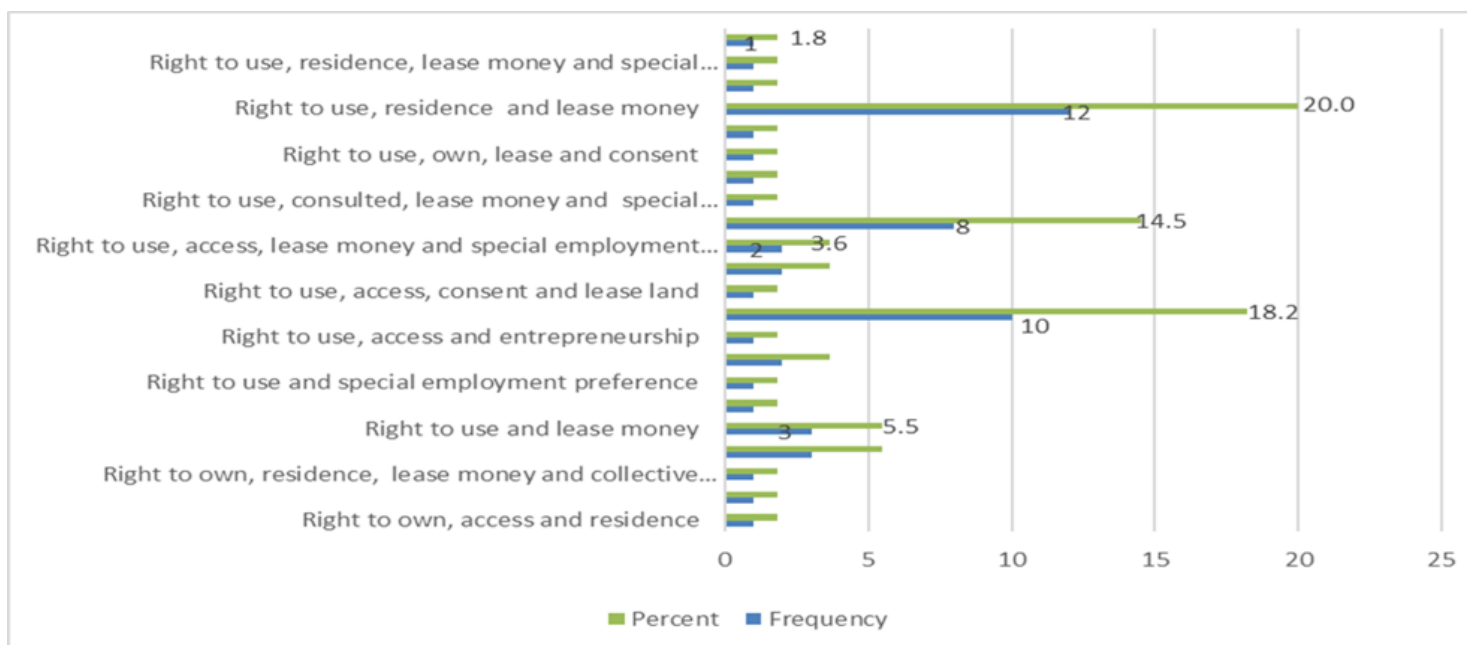
This research strongly reinforces the cultural significance of customary land (Figure 1). Ninety-one per cent regarded the culture, identity and spiritual values of customary land as more important than its commercial value, irrespective of gender, age, and educational level. This result is similar to that reported by Boydell (2010, p.18) in a cross-cultural study in that most Indigenous peoples maintain an interconnected relationship with the land despite the high demand for commercial development.

The finding reiterates Ravuvu's (1983) observation that for iTaukei, Vanua (identity, place, land), represents the human manifestation of the physical environment having a sacred symbiotic relation. The land is not merely a physical entity but an extension of iTaukei social world. Also, Ravuvu (1998, p. 19) maintained that customary land embodied collective ownership, reciprocity, identity and spiritual value. In a similar view, Nabobo-Baba (2008, p. 7) articulated that land defines

iTaukei, his duties and cultural obligations, his rights, and his access to many things in life that are customarily defined.

Increasing integration into the market economy has resulted in cultural dissonance concerning land usage, as iTaukei LOUs choose to treat land as a commodity or preserve its cultural value. However, other experiences with some Indigenous communities show that cultural and economic values of land can coexist to meet the changing needs of their members (see Sakai 2010, Movono, 2012).

Figure 2. Customary Land Rights Benefits



Source: author, February 2020 Narewa village ( $n = 55$ )

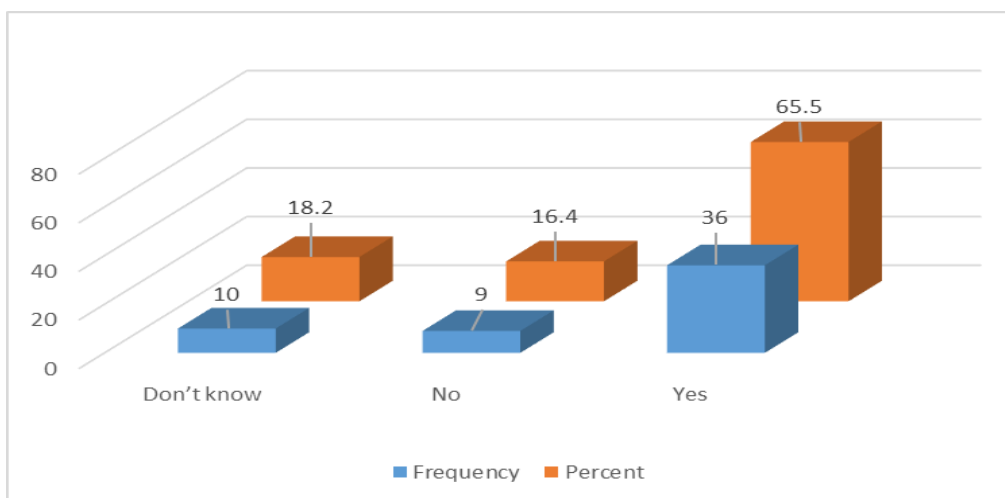
Other relevant results from the field study concerning customary land cast a new light on its significance. Contrary to previous assumptions, respondents put high emphasis on the economic benefits such as lease money, employment opportunities and entrepreneurship (Figure 2). There is less emphasis placed on spiritual and customary values. However, land has been connected to Narewa identity by way of distinction to differentiate the people of Narewa from other iTaukei in Fiji. This is illustrated in responses like this: 'I am from Narewa, and whatever I do will reflect my identity and the *vanua o Nadi*, as different from other iTaukei social groups in Fiji.' In another expression, a 47-year-old man stated, 'Our land reminds us of our ancestors, our identity ... it (is) the source (of) life for us and our future generations.' These views reflect iTaukei sentiment when it comes to land-identity-spirituality rhetoric.

While the value of land to one's identity remains important, customary land is also seen as a social and physical capital to meet the current needs of LOUs while safeguarding the needs of the future generation of Narewa. As a male participant remarked: 'As landowners, our strength lies with our land, it holds us together, our source of living and if we are not careful, our children will suffer ... especially in Narewa where there is a high demand to lease our land.' The study suggests that respondents are conscious about the identity and economic benefits derived from their land as well as safeguarding the welfare of future generations that is in line with sustainable livelihood framework.

The livelihood approach explains that different people in various places experience different livelihoods (Scoones, 2009, p.172). Indigenous people often live on lands governed by customary tenure and other community arrangements. For Indigenous people, the land is the primary capital that generates the realisation of other capital since it holds cultural and spiritual values. In this context, the sustainable livelihoods concept encompasses the resources, capacities and activities needed by people to live. A livelihood is sustainable when a person or household can face and recover from shock and stress at the same time maintain or improve their resources and capacities without deteriorating their natural resource base (Department for International Development, 1999). The shock from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 demonstrates how the people in Narewa overcame the economic downturn by re-engaging in farming to sustain their lives. According to the village headman: ‘... [COVID-19] revives the traditional custom of *solesolevaki* (communal work) in the community, it is fun and brings back good old memories of [communalism] ... our culture is our main strength if we do not sustain it; we are doomed just as the [pandemic] has shown us.’

Secondly, another novel finding that underscores the economic rationale of customary land is the prevailing preference to lease the land for commercial ventures rather than maintaining a communal customary arrangement. Sixty-six per cent of respondents preferred to lease the customary land for individual or family commercial ventures (Figure 3).

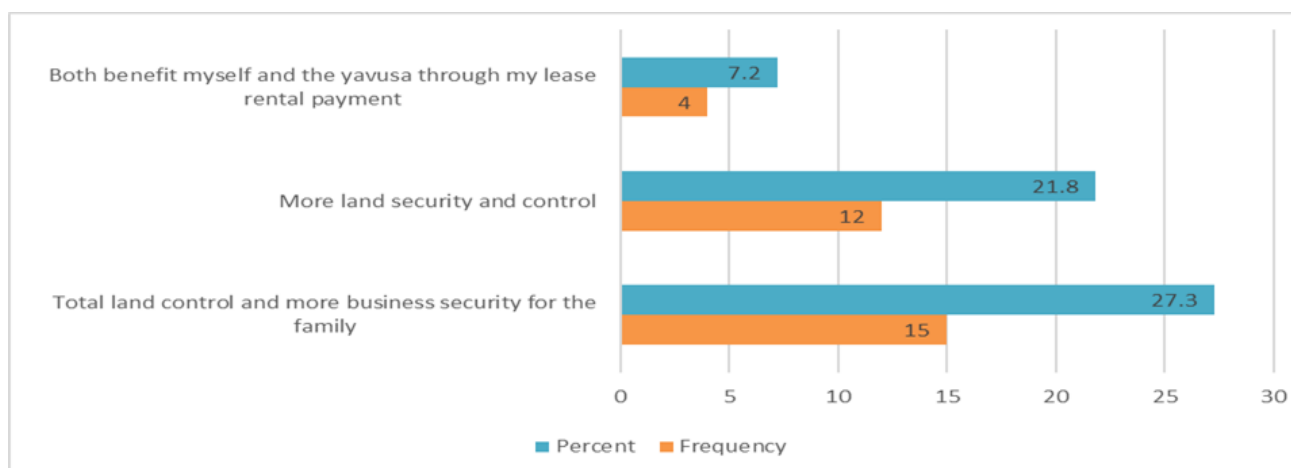
Figure 3. Preference to Lease Customary Land



Source: author, February 2020 Narewa village ( $n = 55$ )

The study shows in Figure 3 the significance of economic benefits in respondents' choices to lease land. Leasing land grants individuals and family's exclusive control over a parcel of land while offering a sense of business security. In contrast, customary land holding is fluid and insecure in terms of ownership and business stability. Also, the same result shows that leasing customary land benefits the lessee and the LOUs through lease payment.

Figure 4. Thematic Explanations for Lease Option



Source: author, February 2020 Narewa village ( $n = 55$ )

Fifteen respondents chose the lease option since it gave total land control and higher security for the family business, followed by 12 participants who believed leasing land gave more land security and control, while four respondents would take the option since it both benefited the lessee financially and the *yavusa* through lease rental payment (Figure 4). A female respondent explained that: ‘I will love to lease land as it gives me the freedom to control my land for the betterment of my children’s future ... I can be my own boss free from collective ownership and its hassle.’

For those who did not take the option, the study indicates that customary land holds the ideal of communalism, not individualism. Another disabling factor is the cumbersome village governance system one must navigate before being eligible to lease the customary land. Finally, there is not enough capital to invest. A 22-year-old male respondent said: ‘No definitely I will not take that option. The village process alone is time-consuming, and I do not have enough capital ... it’s good to lease it to foreign investors, they bring in more money than [locals]’. A 42-year-old man believed that the sacredness of customary land lies on its common ownership as it bonds the people together.

The controversial view on customary land and its commercial values has been the subject of debate since colonialism (France 1969b) and was complicated by the arrival of indentured sugar cane labourers (Lal, 1992) and the recent land reforms (Chamber, 2016; Dodd, 2012). Overall, Ward (1994, p.11) warned of the danger of *iTaukei* increasing landlessness as more native land leases would deny *iTaukei* rights to access and usage. The same sentiment is shared by the Tui Nadi: ‘there [are] more people living in Narewa ... we have to be careful leasing our land as there is not enough space ... even giving leases to our members can cause land shortage.’ A similar view was shared by a 48-year-old man: ‘I want to lease [the] *mataqali* land but at the same time there is not enough land for everyone’.

Given its strategic location near urban centres and socio-economic profile, the preferential view towards lease ownership is a psychological reaction to the geographical reality of Narewa village. In line with the previous study in the late 1950s, Ward (1965) illustrated that villages close to urban areas were firmly locked into commercial farming or other monetary activities. In such areas, the monetary value of land was encouraged, though leasehold and cash cropping and lending to members of other *mataqali* was rarely practiced.

The same monetary approach applies to Narewa through tourism. However, unlike the study by Ward, Narewa adopts a land tenure system known as ownership in common (OIC), where land use rights and access are available to all members. Nevertheless, the study suggests that cumbersome internal village governance processes and lack of capital discourage members from taking this option. As a 44-year-old male explained: ‘... going through the village governance process to lease land is time-consuming, especially getting the consent from different landowning groups, and if they [members] have personal grudges against you, it [is] better not to waste your time trying.’

The inconsistency concerning customary land in Narewa can be better understood by the psychological theory known as cognitive dissonance theory. The dissonance view is based on the premise that people need to maintain consistency between thoughts, feelings, and behaviour (Festinger, 1957, pp. 1–2). In its basic meaning, cognitive dissonance is about inconsistency when individuals hold two thoughts or views that are inconsistent, resulting in psychological discomfort (*ibid.*). In the context of this paper, dissonance is examined through the lens of cultural dissonance for iTaukei landowners in Narewa to highlight the inconsistency between their thoughts on customary land and views of LOUs on its intended utilisation. Cultural dissonance is embedded in every society as it undergoes transition (Anderson, 1993, p. 109). Facing dissonance, the iTaukei landowners in Narewa have ascribed economic values to their resources as they navigate the transition into society. Yet, the cultural values of the land are protected within oneself and were reflected in how participants responded (Figure 3). The study reveals a high level of inconsistency placed on the spirituality and identity of iTaukei land, despite empirical evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, suggesting that their views, behaviours, and choices prioritise the commercial value of land. The cultural dissonance towards customary land raises critical questions concerning the relationship between iTaukei customs and economic considerations, particularly with the high demand for land development.

### **Equal Distribution a Thorn in the Cultural Space**

The study found 58 per cent agreed and 29 per cent strongly agreed that the equal distribution policy had contributed to the breakdown of traditional norms in the village, compared to 5 per cent who disagreed. The equal distribution policy contributes to the breakdown of the iTaukei custom within the village, as the policy has given rise to the mistaken belief among young people and adults that they are equal in status with elders and chiefs in the village. Consequently, anti-social behaviours such as disrespect and arrogance are often displayed on a regular basis, particularly during episodes of drunkenness in the village vicinity. Some argue that, unlike lease recipients in villages that are in the outer islands or the highlands, the transformation of iTaukei values and attitudes in Narewa has been significantly influenced by its proximity to urban centres (Sakai, 2023, *in press*). Mehan (1998) highlighted that other studies have confirmed that communities close to urban areas experience sustained high interaction with outside influences, leading to changes in attitude, especially among youths. Therefore, this urban proximity could contribute to behavioural changes observed in Narewa compounded by the equal distribution policy.

The views presented in the preceding section speculate on a few possible assumptions. First, the policy implication to distribute lease benefits monthly has increased the consumption interval, potentially leading to non-virtuous attitudes considered un-iTaukei, such as rowdiness, drunkenness, and disrespect to others in the village space. For iTaukei villages, Nayacakalou (1978) described that the basic pattern of attitude and behaviour exhibited to senior members of the tribe is one of

utmost respect, caution, and restraint. Senior members must not be addressed or referred to by name; if spoken to at all, they must be addressed slowly and differently. Respect for senior members of the social group is paramount.

Second, the policy implication to distribute lease monies to youth from the age of 18 has given them purchasing power to engage in alcohol consumption accessible in nearby outlets. While drinking is a normal social behaviour during the old distribution, regular monthly payments might contribute to a high probability of alcohol consumption amongst the dominant youthful population in the village. However, the magnitude of their impacts is uncertain and difficult to measure.

Third, consistently being a recipient of lease money has a negative impact on work ethos. While job opportunities are available for landowners in the hotel industry as part of the lease agreement, poor work ethics lead to frequent termination of employment. An older youth explained:

Many young adults in the village just thinking of working in Denarau Island and nothing else, there is no goal for [higher education] ...when they got the job, they got fired again for not following proper work procedures... there is a false perception amongst the people that we own the hotels.

According to the village official, there is a high tendency for employees to miss work when they receive substantial lease payments, especially for young adults. In a similar perspective, Vakaoti (2007) stated that youths are easily influenced by peer pressure and engage in petty illegal activities that supplement and support their livelihoods. According to the village headman, EDIP has contributed to the high incidence of drunkenness, which leads to other social problems.

Another significant finding on the impact of equal distribution on culture is the misinterpretation of equal rights. Individuals negatively use the right of equality to undermine custom. A village elder explained that:

Young people seem to think that [EDIP] gives them the right to be equal with the older generation in the village... and sadly some adults accept this view of [equality] in terms of money ... as a result young people become disrespectful even to their parents. We can't do anything eh, because the government gives this [lease money] as their shares.

The view on equality has wider implications for the iTaukei village. This appears to be the case of individual attitudes rather than the policy of equal distribution. It could be speculated that the right to be equal attached to the notion of equal distribution (Figure 8) is misinterpreted in the wrong context by some individuals to undermine the custom of *veiwekani* (kinship) and *veidokadokai* (respectful). However, it is unclear whether this is a suitable explanation concerning equal distribution, equal rights, and change in people's attitudes. To illustrate these relationships, a head of the *mataqali* explained:

Equal distribution has given more rights to young people that they think to have the right to do whatever they want ... now they have [audacity] to disrespect the village [protocols] when they get drunk. It's hard to control alcohol consumption because [it] is their money ... by law it's theirs not [for parents] to control.

Ravuvu (1983, p. 6), among others, stressed the importance of rank and age as determinants of

behaviour. Family members are ranked in order of seniority by birth. The younger should obey and respect the older. They should not disregard instructions or demands from seniors nor question their authority (Ravuvu, 1983, pp. 7–8). A common sentiment among the respondents is that increased alcohol consumption in the village vicinity is a new normal for urban villages like Narewa. Such a geographical profile puts pressure on the sustenance of village customs by its members.

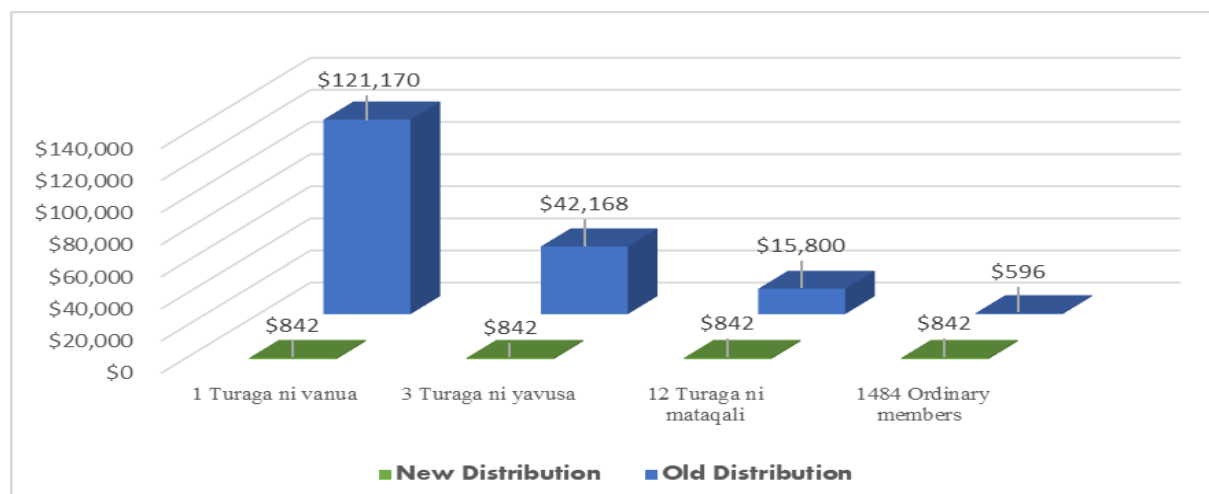
A study by Nainoca (2011, p. i) used the common mud crab (*qari*) as a metaphor to illustrate the interconnection between all aspects of the *bula vakavanua* (iTaukei way of life) in the iTaukei world. That is to say that iTaukei lives in an environment influenced by other factors, including political, social, and economic factors. These factors have to be continually and appropriately integrated into the iTaukei way of life, so the crab adapts and flourishes. Given the socio-economic, political, and geographic characteristics of Narewa, the crab metaphor is significant, particularly in how members can collectively negotiate the decision on issues such as village protocol, land policies, lease monies, and its impact on their livelihoods.

It is evident from youth responses, that while EDIP empowers them financially, the nature of village governance constrains meaningful participation by the youth in village affairs. According to Vakaoti (2007), in traditional Pacific communities, youth participation is unknown because young people are not often asked. As a mature youth expressed:

During village meetings there is always a tendency for [youth] to listen and there is less participation on issues like land. Although we want to share our views, we feel it's a waste of time or it's just not proper ... the elders' views always count.

Ravuvu (1988, p. 81) expressed that institutions like education, religion, and traditional systems significantly influence young people's status and degree of social involvement. While youth in Narewa are in the village vicinity, they are highly mobile and during lease payment, they will collectively pool their finances together and enjoy a weekend getaway in Suva or hotel accommodation in Nadi night clubbing before they return to the village, mostly empty-handed. This view leads to a similar conclusion regarding the urban proximity of villages as a contributing factor to change in attitudes together with poor parental guidance.

Figure 5. Comparison Between the Old Distribution and New Lease Distribution in 2017.



Source: author, March 2020 Narewa village



Following the old distribution method, the three title chiefs would have the following share FJ\$189,607 (15 percent) for the *turaga ni mataqali*, FJ\$126,505 (10 percent) for the *turaga ni yavusa* and FJ\$63,202 (5 percent) for the *turaga ni vanua* (Figure 5). If the balance of \$884,835.32 is shared equally with the 1484 members, each member will receive \$596. Within the Yavusa-e-Tolu ownership in common social structure are three yavusa, twelve *mataqali* and sixteen *tokatoka* (extended family unit).

The unequal share, based on ascribed entitlement, would automatically earn an annual income of FJ\$15,800 for each head of the *mataqali* while head of the *yavusa* would take home FJ\$42,168, and the head of the *vanua* would receive FJ\$63,202. If the lease money is distributed equally to all the 1500 members, including village chiefs, everyone will receive FJ\$842 annually. Alternatively, the bigger share of the paramount chief, in the case of *Na momo na Tui Nadi*, holder of the three titles as head of the *mataqali* and *yavusa* Navatulevu, and the *turaga ni vanua* and would receive the three shares for the title chiefs with the total annual lease share of FJ\$121,170 (Figure 5). The old distribution based on ascribed entitlement was a major source of inequality in Fiji. It is a cultural system that rewards people for their position in the social hierarchy, regardless of their position in society.

In an earlier criticism, Lloyd (1982, p.221) stated the old distribution reinforced ‘the political role of the chiefs’ and ‘had a disastrous effect on the economic attitude of the *mataqali* owners ... [and] served as a disincentive to Fijian development of the lands they own.’ Furthermore, the share for the *mataqali* members is immaterial to induce them to do nothing but spend it on consumer goods (*ibid.*). A significant difference of the new distribution, as the name dictates, it treats everyone equally in terms of lease share to reflect the government’s vision of making all landowners equal.

The Bainimarama land reform, aligned with the government policy of equal citizenry, targeted the pro-chief lease distribution method, attracting mixed reactions from the iTaukei population. From an oppositional view, Lal (2009, pp. 32–33) criticised the government land reforms as a process to undermine the iTaukei chiefly institutions amongst other things. In another view, Boydell (2010) argued that land reforms rewarded military individuals who hold ‘real power’ without the benefit of chiefly blood. Despite opposition to the new policy, this study shows that 85 per cent support the new distribution as it empowers ordinary members of LOU (Sakai in press, 2023).

As part of its manifestoes, the new coalition government committed to reviewing EDIP and all native land laws passed by the Bainimarama government from the 2006 coup until December 2022. Consequently, the coalition government has repealed the iTaukei Land Trust Budget Amendment Act, known as Bill 19, and reinstated the TLTB consent clause for any improvement on leased customary land. Furthermore, they have reconvinced GCC, which was abolished by the Bainimarama government in 2012, on the pretext it was irrelevant in contemporary Fijian society. On 25th May 2023, the GCC endorsed reinstating the old distribution; however, limited details were disclosed. Nonetheless, the Minister for iTaukei revealed that the allocation for head chiefs would be reduced to assist in financing traditional obligations. The funding for this reinstatement is expected to be partially sourced from 10% of the TLTB poundage and the revenue from equal distribution. It is important to note that the endorsement is still pending approval by the Fijian parliament.

## Conclusion

While the development rhetoric through land reforms gives a sense of optimism in a country torn by manufactured land-ethnic politics, the iTaukei autonomous right to their ancestral land has been compromised. First, the policy implication of the equal distribution rolled out by the Bainimarama government with the claim to protect iTaukei customs is not substantiated in this study. On the contrary, the equal distribution policy has destabilised iTaukei customs in the sacred village space, which safeguards iTaukei cultural practices and identity.

The evidence acquired through this research suggests that customary land is largely perceived as a commodity rather than being highly revered for its spiritual identity value by iTaukei, and the cultural dissonance approach aptly describes this view. In Narewa, participants ranked the cultural currency of their land the highest, yet their attitude towards it is driven by the intent to generate financial capital. This narrative must be shared transparently from the family to the village and even at the national level to create consciousness amongst iTaukei that customary land holds significant economic importance without downplaying its spiritual identity. Embracing this truth will enable the political will to pass appropriate land legislation, fostering unity and easing the land-ethnic division that has caused social and political instabilities. Cultural dissonance reflects the overall illiteracy of iTaukei in land law, which undermines the full participation of LOUs in land development and business participation.

The Coalition government elected in late 2022 has taken significant steps in revising laws related to iTaukei affairs and customary land and reinstating the GCC. Although the government has indicated its intention to review the EDIP, it has refrained from making any parliamentary decisions. This cautious approach stems from the realisation that hastily introducing amendments could adversely affect ordinary lease recipients and their political preferences during the forthcoming general elections in 2026. Indeed, it would be political suicide since iTaukei LOUs live in close-knit communities and have the tendency to oppose the changes through the ballot box.

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