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**THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL EFFECTS OF
TROPICAL CYCLONE WINSTON IN FIJI
RECENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

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The Social and Political Effects of Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji: Recent Research Perspectives

This research brief summarises three recent publications that analyse some of the social and political effects of Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji. The research was conducted by a multidisciplinary team with a core of SGDIA researchers (Romitesh Kant, Jope Tarai and Jason Titifanue) but also including researchers from other Schools within USP, including Geography (Renata Varea) and Accounting (Glenn Finau), and international collaborators from The University of Auckland (Prof. Andreas Neef) and La Trobe University (Dr John Cox). Each of the articles was published in special editions of their respective journals, including two special editions dedicated to disasters (*Pacific Journalism Review* and a double edition of *Anthropological Forum*) and one on the theme ‘Possessing Paradise’ (*The Contemporary Pacific*). Interested readers may like to explore the excellent contributions of the other authors represented in these collections. This research brief concludes with some suggestions for disaster management practitioners.

It is now widely recognised that disasters are not simply ‘natural’ events but have profound social and political effects (Fountain and McLaughlin 2016; Holmgaard 2019). This places a new obligation on disaster management specialists, humanitarian agencies and government, media and civil society actors to develop deeper understandings of the local and national contexts of any disaster but particularly large-scale disasters, such as Tropical Cyclone Winston, that have long term impacts. Scholars of climate change are recognising similar imperatives (Neef et al. 2018; Nunn et al. 2016). Cyclone Winston was the largest cyclone ever recorded in the Pacific Islands region and hit Fiji in February 2016. Winston caused immense damage from which the nation has not fully recovered, even three years later.

The three stand-alone studies profiled here explore overlapping aspects of the social ramifications of Tropical Cyclone Winston, covering social media usage, public debates and Christian religious interpretations of the disaster. The first article, ‘Social media and disaster communication: A case study of Cyclone Winston’ (Finau et al. 2018), documents many of the

constructive uses of social media before, during and after the cyclone, particularly the rallying of the community around the hashtag #StrongerThanWinston. The second and third articles draw out other social, political and religious aspects of the cyclone's effects.

The second article, 'Disaster, Divine Judgment, and Original Sin: Christian Interpretations of Tropical Cyclone Winston and Climate Change in Fiji' (Cox et al. 2018), examines the backlash against #StrongerThanWinston by evangelical Christians who saw the claim to be stronger than Winston as a denial of the divine purpose in sending the cyclone as a punishment for Fijians' sins. A specific motivation for these complaints and jeremiads was the perceived apostasy of the Bainimarama government, which has a pluralist cultural and economic agenda that many iTaukei (indigenous Fijians) fear marginalises them and denies Fiji's Christian destiny as a nation.

In the third article, 'Disaster Preparedness and the Abeyance of Agency: Christian Responses to Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji' (Cox et al. 2019), the research team uncovers a more humble kind of Christianity in the villages of Ba District. They too see the cyclone as a chastisement but without the ethno-nationalist agenda of urban evangelicals. Rather than condemning others, they examine themselves and put their own agency aside as they humble themselves before God. Below, a synopsis of each of the three articles is offered, before this research brief concludes with some suggestions for disaster management practitioners.

1. Social Media and Disaster Communication: A Case Study of Cyclone Winston. Glenn Finau, Jope Tarai, Renata Varea, Jason Titifanue, Romitesh Kant and John Cox (2018) *Pacific Journalism Review* 24 (1): 123–137.

This article presents an analysis of how social media was used during and immediately following Tropical Cyclone Winston, which left a wake of destruction and devastation in Fiji during February 2016. Social media is increasingly being used in crises and disasters as an alternative form of communication (Bird et al. 2012; Yila, Weber and Neef 2013). Social media use in crisis communication varies according to the context, the nature of the disaster and the maturity of social media use. Fiji's experience during Cyclone Winston contributes to the growing literature as it shows how social media was used during each stage of a disaster in a developing country.

The article finds that, immediately before Cyclone Winston, people used social media (particularly Facebook) to share information about the approach of the cyclone, to stay informed about the whereabouts of relatives and follow new developments. During the cyclone, individuals used social media to share their experiences, with some citizens filming the cyclone

as it happened and even one citizen live-tweeting her ordeal from the shelter of a cupboard in her house.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, the hashtag #StrongerThanWinston was coined as a rallying point to bolster a sense of national solidarity. #StrongerThanWinston was the ‘brain child’ of a Fijian disaster risk management official who had visited Vanuatu in 2015, after Tropical Cyclone Pam (see Calendra 2019; McDonnell 2019; and Wentworth 2019). There, the hashtag #WithVanuatu seemed targeted at humanitarian groups and external actors who might contribute to a fund-raising appeal, not the people of Vanuatu who had faced the disaster. Learning from the Vanuatu experience, #StrongerThanWinston sought to mobilise the whole Fijian nation to contribute to relief and rebuilding, positioning Fijians, not as victims but as an empowered and unified community. This proved to be highly successful, fostering support of official relief efforts and countless community fund-raising events that used hashtag #StrongerThanWinston in their appeals.

2. Disaster, Divine Judgment, and Original Sin: Christian Interpretations of Tropical Cyclone Winston and Climate Change in Fiji. John Cox, Glenn Finau, Romitesh Kant, Jope Tarai and Jason Titifanue (2018) *The Contemporary Pacific* 30 (2): 380-411.

This article takes recent Fijian Christian public debates about the meaning of Tropical Cyclone Winston as a key site in which imaginings of Fijian society that are founded on an ideal of Fiji as a ‘paradise’ are being contested and reworked. As the idyll of island harmony is disrupted by natural disasters, Christian traditions invoke paradise not simply as a state of innocence but as a narrative of salvation history in which paradise is lost through sin and must be restored through sacrifice and repentance.

For iTaukei (Indigenous Fijians), this salvation history of paradise given, lost, and regained is an emplaced history, grounded in ideas about *vanua* as a sacred homeland that is central to the relationship between iTaukei and God (Presterudstuen 2016: 97; Ryle 2010). The *vanua* is a kind of paradise that acts to house and provision the chosen nation. However, this Christian nationalist interpretation sits in tension with the counterclaims of the tourism industry in which, in keeping with Deckard (2010), Fiji and its indigenous inhabitants function merely as a backdrop for Australian leisure activities (Connell 2016). Furthermore, neither of these views of Fiji as a natural paradise account for the presence of Indo-Fijians. In the wake of Tropical Cyclone Winston, we consider how some of these issues of regional and national identity, disasters, and climate change are understood by Fijian Christians.

Based on the idea of iTaukei as a chosen people akin to Israel in the Bible, many Fijian Christians have seen Tropical Cyclone Winston as an act of divine judgment and punishment. As noted earlier, for some ethno-nationalist evangelical Christians, this judgement was focused on the Bainimarama government and its secular agenda that, for them, betrays Fiji's destiny as a Christian nation. For these Christians, the hashtag #StrongerThanWinston was an hubristic and even blasphemous claim that denied the will of God and set Fijians up for further chastisement.

These narratives of sin and judgement reflect the enduring fractures within Fijian society. However, as the paper explains, as the discourse slips from the disaster of Cyclone Winston to climate change—as is now inevitable across the Pacific—the scale moves from the national to the global. While ethno-nationalist Christians may decry Prime Minister Bainimarama for betraying their vision of a holy nation, when talking about climate change, the narrative of blame shifts to a universal responsibility where all of humanity are responsible for breaking God's environmental laws (Rudiak-Gould 2014).

3. Disaster Preparedness and the Abeyance of Agency: Christian Responses to Tropical Cyclone Winston in Fiji. John Cox, Renata Varea, Glenn Finau, Jope Tarai, Romitesh Kant and Jason Titifanue (2019) *Anthropological Forum*. Early online view. DOI: 10.1080/00664677.2019.1647833

Where the previous two articles focused on the national scale and public debate, this paper has a rural focus and explores the responses of villages in the Ba District of Viti Levu to the cyclone (Ba District is highly vulnerable to natural disasters and has suffered severe flooding on many occasions before and after Cyclone Winston (Yila, Weber and Neef 2013).

This third paper begins by considering international practices of disaster preparedness in the light of comments from iTaukei Christians who saw the cyclone not as a 'natural disaster' but as an 'act of God'. We explore the tensions between those two views, particularly in relation to disaster preparedness where international agencies and national disaster management authorities understand preparedness in secular terms as an important pre-emptive response to anticipated natural hazards. Our analysis of Fijian responses to Cyclone Winston indicates that preparedness is also regarded as important and practical by cyclone survivors but has a moral dimension that can be used to assign blame to underprepared members of the community. Christians have a long tradition of warning each other to be morally prepared for the return of Christ and we argue that these religious meanings overlap and give meaning to secular practices of disaster preparedness.

However, Fijian villagers' experiences of terror and awe during Tropical Cyclone Winston also make them aware of the limits of human agency, prompting them to reflect on God's role in the cyclone and the need for collective repentance and renewed Christian commitment. These are practices of 'humbling oneself' (Taylor 2015) that reflect the hierarchies within Fijian Christianity (Morgain 2015; Tomlinson 2013) and that place Christians in a subordinate position in relation to the God, where they wait humbly for divine guidance rather than asserting their own wills. This 'abeyance of agency'—the phrase first appears in (Miyazaki 2000)—is a deliberate setting aside of the self in anticipation of God's action. For these Christians, resetting their relationship with God by humbling themselves is an essential part of responding to the damage and trauma of a great disaster.

The effectiveness of disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation efforts can only be enhanced by a better understanding of the values of affected communities, including religious and spiritual values. We seek to contribute to this knowledge by showing how disaster preparedness both converges with and diverges from Fijian Christian practices.

Implications for disaster preparedness and response.

Together, these three papers contribute to a growing literature on the social, political and religious dimensions of disasters. Although some of the content overlaps (social media, Christianity), the 'topography' of this content varies considerably from case to case, showing again that 'context' is contested and highly situational. The second two papers show the variations within Fijian Christian communities and differ again from Holmgaard's recent account of social and religious change following the 2009 tsunami in Samoa.

Translating social science research into the concerns of practitioners in international development is a fraught process, as the kinds of policy 'lessons' expected usually focus on the priorities and systems and short-term commitments of donor agencies. More often than not, this shuts out space for serious consideration of the complexity of the local context or, worse, reconstructs the context as a negative mirror of the solutions proffered by the donor program. As Ferguson (1990) and many others have documented, these are structural features of development practice that are very difficult to address from within the system. Our intent in conducting the research was to undertake critical study of the social elements of a key national (and regional) disaster, not to provide evaluations of the effectiveness of government or NGO programs. Nevertheless, we believe there are some insights from these three papers that should inform disaster management practitioners who seek a better understanding of the social and cultural context in the Pacific.

1. Valuing local learning

In Finau et al (2018), we document how Fijian disaster management officials visited Vanuatu and were informed by the response to Tropical Cyclone Pam there. In particular, the strategic framing of the hashtag #StrongerThanWinston was based on a Fijian official's critical analysis of the Vanuatu experience of #WithVanuatu and was vastly more effective and inclusive as a result. External agencies need to do more to create spaces where their own voices do not dominate and can allow local actors to take the lead in analysing events and planning appropriate strategies and responses.

2. Contestation and blame

Disasters generate competing narratives that may have political implications. Narratives of divine vengeance are not easily legible to secular disaster management agencies. However, they should not simply be dismissed as the rantings of religious cranks. Conspiracy theories are accounts of how the world works that 'express profound suspicions of power' (West and Sanders 2003: 7). It is important for relief agencies to be alert to these dynamics so that they can take steps to build trust with communities and minimise the risks of being misinterpreted (Fountain, Kindon and McMurray 2004). Some donors have also had some positive results from working at progressive forms of theological discussion, such as the Theology of Gender Equality program in Papua New Guinea (Churches Partnership Program 2016) and now the Australian Churches Agencies Network Disaster Operations (CAN DO) is undertaking work in several Pacific countries on the Theology of Disaster Risk Management (Banfield 2019a, 2019b and 2019c).

3. Patience and Trust

In Cox et al. (2019), my co-authors and I describe 'the abeyance of agency' as a Christian practice of embodied humility, repentance and rededication to God. This disposition came through strongly in the accounts of many of the villagers in our study and stands in contrast to both the judgemental denunciations of ethno-nationalist evangelicals and the more considered and consoling responses of the historic mainline churches. However, the humble abeyance of agency may not easily map onto post-disaster participatory needs assessment processes that demand rapid responses from people about what they require to get back on their feet. As disaster management systems come to recognise the importance of social and cultural capital in disaster response (Yila, Weber and Neef 2013), they must also accept that these features of the 'context' have their own dynamics and cannot simply be instrumentalised by well-intentioned external parties.

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