

The Growth of Species and the Making of Timeless Forms: Divine Objects and Extraordinary Bodies in Fijian Ritual Polities

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ABSTRACT: Oceanic polities and social organisations are often characterised as life-giving systems that reproduce specific modes of humanity in ritual cycles of cosmogony or in regenerative flows of ancestral substance and relatedness. These portrayals typically enforce a strong ontological contrast between the properties of human beings and those of their immortal forebears. This paper shows in detail how, far from reproducing human life as a dilution of ancestral timelessness in a specifically human realm, Fijian ritual polities act as ‘paradise machines’, working to assemble precisely configured axes of natural species, human being, manufactured objects, ancestors and divinities as simulacra of the mythically narrated and danced domain of Nakauvadra. By comprehending Fijian ritual polities as hopeful denials of specifically human being, light is shed upon the cosmological significance of familiar modes of ritual hierarchy and ceremonial gift-giving, but also of technical synthesis that has as its mission the material recomposition of these axes of timeless forms and relations: or, as in the case of sorcery, their deathly technical negation.

‘And when the priests have accomplished all of the necessary rites in the proper order, God comes to the Hebrews; in the form of a cloud he fills the tent. It’s a machine for making God appear (Tresch 2005:57-58).’

LIFE, GROWTH AND OBJECT: COSMIC ECONOMY AND LIFE-GIVING THEORY

If the great merit of old-time substantivism (Polanyi, Arensberg & Pearson 1958) was its unwavering commitment to the social embeddedness of ‘the economy’, its weakness lay in the systematic disembedding of the social from indigenous cosmic orders. Recent anthropological accounts of the production and reproduction of human life (‘the economy, stupid’) have tended to reverse this rationality, locating indigenous perceptions of human need and practice amidst cosmically ramifying forms and flows (Sahlins 1988; Empson 2014; Bertelsen 2014). Within such formations, known life runs through rites that fold primordial space-time inwards, and through organised divisions of labour that tie quotidian temporalities to these spatio-temporal folds.

In this vein, the analysis of Austronesian economy has classically supposed the prevalence of ‘flows of life’ (Fox 1980), ‘life-giving myths’ (Hocart 1953), ‘life-giving deaths’ (de Coppet 1981), and flows of substance (Wagner 1977; Strathern 1990) that relay generative power to village temples, ceremonial grounds, household gardens and social groups. The life-giving mechanism may be cosmogonic (i.e. it may symbolically repeat the creation of the cosmos) revivifying the universe against inherent forces of degeneration; or it may channel potent contemporary powers from a cosmos already formed towards receptive ecologies of human

dwelling. Variants of the paradigm stress the ontological grounds of relatedness and flow (Wagner 1977; Strathern 1990), as well as emphasising the extent to which technical processes, artefacts, art objects and objectified growth (e.g. ceremonial yams) lend performative form and visibility to the diffuseness of life-giving power and to the transformational fluidity of primary relatedness (Gell 1999; Lemonnier 2005; Coupaye 2013). These emphases on the ontological grounds and aesthetic revelations of Oceanic techniques and products are reinforced in this paper.

As well though, the focus of the account is upon the transformations of persons and relations which are so grounded and revealed, together with a depiction of the cosmos in which these changes make strong mytho-historical sense. The upshot is that, where techniques, practices and material objects are heavily signified to aesthetically express the vital powers that course through them, their manifest potency is also expressed in the transformations of relation and state which they dynamically bring about. Indeed, the key point is that Austronesian techniques, practices and circulatory objects of the kind presented below express as they transform, make visible what they are asked to alter within their particular worlds. And, from this standpoint therefore not only are such vital life-processes and technical practices consequent upon one another: so too, are their expressive and instrumental potencies.

The classical life-giving model has had an illustrious history in the study of Fijian relations. Key anthropological texts (Hocart 1953; Sahlins 1985; 2014) indicate how weddings, installations and funerals were dramatically organised and symbolically infused by the mythical histories that narratively prefigured them (rather than by any 'structural principles' or cultural 'ethos'). Based too on these histories, social organisation is always better understood as an arrangement for life-giving ritual rather than an administration of persons, whilst significant landscape is the landscape of the ritually eponymous ancestors. In particular, landscape's legendary places are storied for commoner groups who know themselves to be descendants of the subjects who migrated across its ridges, streams and old village sites, and for aristocratic descendants whose sacred ancestors appeared mysteriously at the end of journeys across sky, sea and river.

On this theory, too, precious artefacts play a key role in ritually channelling the *mana* of these sacred strangers towards the descendants of autochthonous ancestors, just as familiar elements of garden feast channel the generative powers of the land towards the descendants of these iconic strangers. Thus, Hocart noted that no sacred Fijian bride was ever ceremonially married and no Fijian chief ever installed, without being wrapped in bark cloth and mats, and being decorated with whale teeth (*tabua*) before being delivered to a man, symbolically 'of the land'. Moreover, the success of all ceremonial required of Fijian men the drinking of copious volumes of *yaqona* (kava) 'under' the chief (Hocart 1987; Sahlins 1985; Toren 1990; Abramson) as well as the distribution of feast across the village towards the 'high' position of the chief. These texts show how the aestheticized techniques and circulatory processes of the life-giving rites in Fiji symbolically elicit the convergence of migrant population and vital power alluded to in legendary narrative, bringing this historic convergence to its apotheosis in village ritual. The following account of vital forces and technical practices inside the Fijian ritual polity builds upon this classical model of life-giving myth and ritual, modifying it though by introducing a change in the way 'life' is construed. Classically, the concept of 'life' in cultural anthropology has relativized indigenous comprehensions of the biological life and fertility. The archival result is an impressive ethnographic series of imagined biologies and indigenous categories, appearing as so many different human perspectives on empirical abundance, prosperity, health, fertility and reproduction. The following account adds to this series, whilst extending the analysis to suggest that assemblages of Fijian myth, ritual and social organisation (and subsequently Christianity) look to re-secure a modality of life that is neither empirically immediate or underlying but which precedes and transcends the vital forces that cosmically precipitate life (with the help of ritual. Indeed, for Fijians past and present), truly desirable life

is divine or ancestral rather than purely human : or, more precisely, is life in forms that were available to humanised ancestry in the once-timeless, now negated realm of the gods and the original ancestors. The implication is that, when Fijian actors work to ceremonially precipitate primordial space-times for the common good, they connect not with the moment at which human beings became separate from the gods but with the earlier pre-human phase of cosmic being during which time human being was implicitly prefigured but preceded by ancestrally divine hybrids of human, botanical and animal form.. For these high-placed super-human hybrids, timeless life was deathless being: and if, in real time, the production and reproduction of human life does loom large as a critical force within the Fijian world, so in reverse does the tendency to replicate paradisiacal timelessness represent this world's truly vital force.

Three interconnected findings of this analysis can be anticipated. Firstly, that whilst, original assemblages of gods and ancestors are gone, , they nonetheless re-appear as intimate presences within the village polity in the form of the extraordinary objects and bodies that circulate, settle and merge with human bodily form. Secondly, that the technical production of objects and the ritual techniques for composing extraordinary bodies has to be seen not only as the productive transformation of raw materials for needy human subjects, but also as the technical materialisation of vital tendencies within the world, both regenerative of mortality and productive of timeless life. Instructively, The Bible also makes a point of linking technical manufacture and engineering to the transmutation of worldly states: viz. in the erection of alters for sacrifice, a Tower called Babel, arks that floated on the flood-water, arks to be carried through the desert, Pharonic pyramids, golden cows, temples, and crosses for crucifixion. All of this manufacture came about at critical points in the re-alignment of human being and divinity, materialising cosmic tendency, transmuting human states. And thirdly, that Fijian conjunctions of life, object and technique are part of a social quest for timeless relations that unfolds specifically by *unifying* the softness of living tissue, the hardness of desiccated or ossified growth, and the ethereal 'spirit' (*sau*) of divinity.

PARADISAICAL ORIGINS, HOURGLASS CONFIGURATIONS AND THE CATASTROPHE OF PRIMAL MANUFACTURE

Asked to identify the genesis of human life and human beings (*tamata*), Fijian village people are most likely to answer in terms of biblical cosmogony. Asked, though, to recount the origins of their patriclans, ancestors and chiefs, village-based Fijians are more likely to invoke the famous migrations made by their ancestral lineages through the forest and by the fabulous shark-born journeys across the sea that mysteriously deposited sacred strangers (*vulagi*) outside their villages. Pushed further to explain the origins of these migrants, people always answer 'Nakauvadra', a spectral location in the mountains of north-east Viti Levu Island. Whilst finding it difficult to narrate a full sequence of events stretching from the break-up of Nakauvadra to the present day, most villagers can recite fragments of these chronicles, whilst the most knowledgeable villagers either verbally embellish whole variants of the Nakauvadran scenario or help weave versions into ceremonial dance-chant routines called *meke*. These village-based narratives and narrative fragments borrow from officially stabilised versions that are taught in Fijian schools and frequently published in national newspapers, but they also resonate with deep-seated symbolisations of the paradisiacal past inside the ritual polity. The most frequent variant, told and danced in the interior of Viti Levu Island is as follows:

In the beginning, the ancestors of all Fijians lived high upon the slopes of a mountain called Nakauvadra ('the pandanus tree'). In a cave at the top of the mountain, looking down at the lower slopes, lived the male snake-god Degei. He had a female companion, the bird Turukawa ('the blood that drips generations') who flew down everyday to the inhabitants of the lower slopes, singing loudly so that her voice could be heard over the whole mountain. Every night, Turukawa returned to her perch at the summit of the mountain to be alongside Degei.

Below Degei and Turukawa were the part-human and part-arboreal ancestors of human clans (human speaking trees, to be precise) who grew ever upwards towards the snake and bird at the top of the mountain. This idyllic setting was threatened by the jealousy of two tree twins Nacirikaumoli and Nakausabaria (these are the names of small trees) who coveted Turukawa and wanted her to stay permanently on the lower slopes. So, one day, the twins asked their tree-uncle, the carpenter Rokola, to make them a wooden bow-and-arrow so that they could shoot down the bird and keep her. But, when the archers shot down the bird and went to retrieve her, she was, of course, dead. Fearing the wrath of Degei, they buried Turukawa in the ground. Waiting in vain for her return, and no longer hearing her song, Degei sent his messenger Uto ('breadfruit') to look for Turukawa. Uto returned to Degei to report the death of Turukawa. In revenge, the snake-god sent down his warriors to do battle with the lower inhabitants: but the carpenter built a wooden stockade that kept the god's army at bay seven times. On the 8th assault though, the god's army broke through the stockade and Degei flooded the rebellious inhabitants downwards out of Nakauvadra.

In this text, genesis is pictured not as wilful creation but as fall-out from the instability and violent dissociation of a longstanding assemblage of timeless life-forms. Several key images – key because they symbolically re-occur in village practices in 'real time' – show how human form in Nakauvadra is timelessly inter-related with other life-forms, anikmal and arboreal, divine and ancestral, and how dialectically this ideally intimate inter-relation of life-forms nonetheless contains the technical and artefactual conditions of its own negation. How are these ideal inter-relations emergent? And, why are they so catastrophically contradicted by the invention of manufacturing technique and manufactured object(s)? Answering these questions allows us to understand something of the symbolic logic of the ritual polity, of its bio-technologies and its techno-cosmo-logics, as well as the logic of its inescapable antithesis.

The paradisiacal life-forms which are carefully selected and organised in the myth are thought in several registers, each register contributing a strand of significance to the seemingly durable but ultimately unstable original apex of the world. Thus, firstly, the durability of the primal scene is thought in terms of its species hybridity and inter-connectedness. Humanity, plant-ness and animality are strongly fused together through the *participation* of human ancestors in tree-ness (below), and through the *possession* of bird-divinity by a humanised snake-god (above). The intermingling of entities in relations of participation and possession is a primary pre-requisite for timeless being in the Fijian world.

Secondly, the durability of the scene is thought topologically: the timeless nature of these hybridised or inter-connected life-forms is associated with their convergence upon each other in the vertical plane. In this register, rooted stationary trees grow upwards towards snakes half-coiled up in a cave who, in turn, look downwards at the upward growth of the trees. The snake's redundant motility is transferred to a bird which, perched and motile (rather than rooted, coiled and stationary), flies up and down between summit and lower slopes, completing a perfect circle of growth by day when it flies down, sundering this unity nocturnally. This trio of species mediations in the vertical plane establishes the image of a singular kind of *quasi-unity* made up of a near-perfect convergence of forms, faulted only by the caprice of avian flight which, whilst it stretches the male relation of possession downwards to create a tight unity with rooted up-growth, also elastically contracts back up, nocturnally disuniting the whole *topos*. Hence, the process of unification begun with inter-species participation and possession is brought even further to a point of completion by means of the up-and-down vagaries of territorialised bird-flight.

Thirdly, the species composition of this unifying assemblage of hybrid paradisiacal life-forms is by no means random. Thus, its chosen species have (a) soft fleshy parts that grow and die (leaves, wooden stems, organic bodies); but they also conspicuously produce (b) soft fleshy parts that harden and endure (bark, wood, discarded skins, feathers) which can be turned into

long-lasting artefacts mythically and in the village. The sense is that, whilst the fleshy order of life harbours individual mortality at its core, fleshy growth is also turned into indestructible matter, generating solid eternity from inside of its decomposable fleshiness.

Fourthly, the state of Nakauvadra is mythically represented by the pandanus tree or screw-pine for a precise reason. Yes, the pandanus is a good for thinking with because, as a primary source of raw material for mats, it readily symbolises the transmutation of ephemeral growth into desiccated eternity. However, the pandanus is more than that. For this tree also ably metaphoricises the quite specific unity of 'below' and 'above', (*e cake* and *e ra*), which underpins the mythic quandary of Nakauvadra. At first glance, the opposite seems to be true since the areal roots of the pandanus connect directly and trunk-lessly with its upper foliage, establishing a binary unity of root ('below') and growth ('above') more directly and graphically than other trees (see fig 1 below). On the other hand, connected only at a conspicuously feeble kink, the pandanus' unmediated unity of root and branch botanically indicates a conspicuously precarious unity. As an 'hour-glass configuration' (Levi-Strauss), the pandanus deftly conveys the simultaneity of a neatly convergent unity of topological opposites and the shape of their impending dissociation.



Fig. 1 the pandanus tree

From this last standpoint, we can see that when the twins shoot down the bird, Turukawa the myth has precisely selected for a particular type of technique (archery) and a particular type of transgression (a theft that unintentionally murders). Technically speaking, archery extends woody upward growth beyond itself in the cultured flight of the arrow. Subsequently, this cultural extension intersects with the natural flight of the bird which, stretching the sky and mountain downwards, helps create a finite point of union (the kink) between the upwards growth of the trees and the downwards face of the sky. Consequently, the very specific techniques of archery and the carpentry that makes it possible are mythically selected to convey, on the one hand, the image of the nearly-complete union of all the species of paradise but, on the other hand, the image of a unity torn apart at the very point and moment of its consummation. In effect, the first technically produced objects in this world (bow and arrow) become a means of converting an immortal figure tethered by the elastic constraints of possession into a dead object bound by the inelastic servitude of property. In the process, the myth offers the choice between timeless hybrid subsumption to androgynous divinity (snake + bird) and the purely human ownership of pure femaleness, leaving male divinity alone and back in the sky. The result of the transgressive choice is the inauguration of death as the defining feature of purely human form in the Fijian world, and the unravelling of mythic timelessness

into mytho-historical time. Not for nothing, then, is the Fiji female divine labelled ‘the blood that drips generations’, the bird whose eponymous fate is to distribute life as deathly discontinuity within cascading time.

The question then is: how does village practice receive such blooded time? By drawing life from the deathly advent of humanity, and being resigned to this derivative condition? Or, by reversing the bloody logic of detachment and discontinuity, dis-assembling the village regime of property and human death in favour of the fluid circulation of objects and timeless relations to other species and to the divine? Examining the actions and directions taken by humanity’s first generations offers an initial insight.

SAVAGE SPACE-TIME: TERRESTRIAL MIGRATION, ROOTEDNESS AND FOREST DIALECTICS

In the beginning was a shattering of the world. After that came migration: or, rather, topologically speaking, a scattering of dissociated elements, funnelled downwards from a splintered Nakauvadra. These lines of flight passed through, on the one side, the *veikau* (the forest or the ‘wild’) and, on the other, across the *lagi* (the river/sea/sky continuum) until they intersected to form ritual polities (*koro*) all over Fiji. How did life re-form, grow and metamorphose along these pathways as it fell from the shattered quasi-whole at the apex of the world towards the relative stabilities of the ritual polity? To what degree – if at all - did the defining dialectic of Fijian existence continue to organise the configuration of falling life-forms?

Through the forest, first of all. My informants in the eastern interior of Fiji spent most of their agricultural lives in gardens carved out of the forest’s lower slopes at the symbolically ‘low’ end of the village. We regularly laughed at the story one ex-missionary told about aboriginal Australians he’d encountered in Northern Territories who had no gardens, didn’t ‘grow anything, but just hunted and gathered’! On the other hand, my informants also often told me that, when every ten years or so, cyclones blew out their gardens, they also had no trouble eking a subsistence out of the forest. They knew where wild taro grew, where *bele* (a gooey kind of spinach-like leaf), seasonal *duruka* (a kind of wild asparagus) and other edible greens could all be found as well as where breadfruit, citrus and other fruit-trees were located. They fished the creeks and mountain streams expertly for fish, eels, prawns and crayfish. And, they could map exactly the locations of productive stands of bamboo and other soft woods for use in house-construction. So, that, not only wouldn’t they starve in the absence of produce: they could and did feed off the sub-tropical forest without relying on agricultural technology and division of labour.

Effectively, interior villages institutionalised hunting and foraging as a subordinate mode of production. The boys would expertly spear-fish prey in the streams, the whole village would annually dam the creeks and streams to net whatever they could catch (which would be roasted on the spot) in a great collective hunt and feast, and every Easter, pre-married youths of both sexes would travel high in the forest to sleep in caves and fish for giant prawns and eels. And, if hunting and foraging remained the under-stated mode in their livelihood, it was because this appropriation was neither ritualised nor the focus of any elaboration of technique. In effect, the sub-tropical rain forest teems with life and is allowed to act as a spontaneously giving hinterland that needs no ritualised life-support and no defined means of technical appropriation. In which case, what are the life-giving rituals, the sacred strangers, and their attendant material culture, actually for? What do they do? It’s true that the ceremonial gift of *yaqona* (kava) to the stranger-chief and pastor is always accompanied by earnest wishes for abundant life (*bula levulevu*) and that *yaqona* itself is referred to as *yaqona bulabula*, or ‘truly living kava’. But, given the promiscuous spontaneity of life offered by the forest and gladly taken, what kind of life and what further manner of abundance are intended in these showy ceremonies and grandiloquent orations? To answer these questions means listening to the descendants of

Nakauvadra, hearing what they repeatedly say about their migration to the villages, and sensibly decoding the symbolic logic of the rites they came to institute in the villages upon the arrival of the sacred strangers.

Two major themes stand out in the portrayal of migration through the forest. Firstly, early-period migration is typified by the journeying of named brothers who repeatedly settle, fight and split fratricidally, and whose lineages fan out across the woody landscape replicating this downwardly agonistic and fissile pattern. Furthermore, the expansion of life brought about by this agonistic multiplication of lineages produced a bodily separation of human beings from other natural species (as was previously normal in Nakauvadra) and, at the same time, mortality as individualised death. Indeed, people frequently say today, 'in those days, people were buried under their own houses'. Consequently, the upper forest is moralised as a fallen landscape where, free of ceremonial obligation, human beings acted – and still act - spontaneously in their pure species form.

But then, secondly,, on their convergent routes to sites of contemporary settlement, splinters of human ancestry came to settle in places that became *koro makawa* ('old villages') where they resumed closer bodily relations with other plant and animal species. Usually, the *vu* - the male ancestor and progenitor of each village patriclan – historically appeared as a trinity of human, animal and plant or tree species. In fact, today, patriclans in the new villages continue to see themselves as being similarly speciated, being human (*tamata*) but also having 'their plant' and 'their animal' totems which they studiously refrain from eating, and which become genitally omnipresent as the constant butt of cousinly jokes. In this system of thinking and living, where degrees of inter-species unity and dissociation signal variable states of divinity and mortality, what is important about the totemic axis is not whether its significations are literal or symbolic (Levi-Strauss 1964/1958) but *that their very literalness at this point in the migration arc symbolises a particular state of being human*. In sum, though the forest is conceived as a homogeneously wild and woody domain, it is also symbolically differentiated into upper-fallen and lower-ascendant zones that respectively correspond to pure human life before the advent of 'old villages' and human life 'becoming plant and animal' again, after this advent.

A further point can be added to this moral topology of migration. Thus, from the advent of the 'old villages', totemic human life-forms are *mata* or *tamata*. In Fijian language use, *mata* usually translates as 'eye' and 'face' but also as a spring of water gushing out of the ground, indicating that eyes and faces are features that actively exude vital energy (rather than absorb it), and that *mata* in the context of humanised life is precisely a flow of life in the forest that is fated to emerge from its hidden innermost planes.

The next section describes how life as *mata*, terrestrially emergent, cosmically ascendant, is drawn into ritual in very precise ways to be supplemented, transformed and encompassed in a timeless web of socio-cosmic relations.

TIMELESS GROWTH AND MATTER: MANA AND THE VILLAGE PARADISE-MACHINE

In its own terms, the Fijian village is a place where migration histories and ancestral destinies are materialised in clan organisation and theatrically transformed in extraordinary rituals. Different as they are (births, weddings, elopements, reconciliations, funerals) all of these rites work to reverse space-time so as to re-establish a human realm of timeless life-forms and hybrid relations.

All of these rites also recapitulate the mysterious convergence and intersection of terrestrial dwellers and sacred strangers. In the interior village-chiefdom of Serea in Naitasiri Province, for example, people relate how a strange women called Adi Waimaro (The Lady of Waimaro') swam across the sea and up the Wainimala River on the back of Dakuwaqa, the shark-god, where she was found lost and dripping-wet by inhabitants of the old village site at a

spot now called *naisobusobu* ('the disembarkation'). The same informants recount how – never specifying whether before or after this extraordinary event - a man called Tui Waimaro (The Lord of Waimaro) mysteriously appeared under the same circumstances and in the same place. Both of these strange 'sky-spirits' (*vulagi*) were happily taken in by the autochthonous population (the 'flesh of the land'), and installed as the sacred principals of rites that would subsequently consummate the union of vital flows of life through the forest and, at great moments of ceremonial truth (*dina*), effectively transmute the hybridity of human/plant/animal states. But, whilst having this property in common, the rites of The Lord and Lady are as different as they are inter-related in their transformative effects upon the village population.

The Lord first of all. Each village in the district of Waimaro claims that its chief is the true Lord of Waimaro: so that at *yaqona* (kava) ceremonies everywhere, the chief is everywhere acclaimed 'mana e dina', ('true power'). In fact, as the true personification and embodiment of the eternal Tui Waimaro, all sitting chiefs are installed at the 'high' (*e cake*) end of rites, whilst the rest of the menfolk sit 'low' (*e ra*): so that, in their symbolic aspect, the rites enclose a slope whose low and high points turn inwards to face each other (as, topographically speaking, the inhabitants of mountainous Nakauvadra did). Moreover, the repeated local message to the anthropologist is that nothing in the village can be higher than the chief and nothing can visibly pass behind him, as if he were summit of a mountain. And indeed, missionary drawings (Reference xxxx(fig 2) show that, not so long ago, chief's houses and temples were built upon mountainous mounds taller than the buildings themselves.

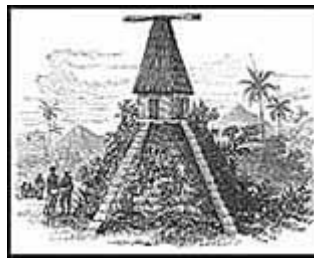


Fig 2

In which case, too, whilst the ritual markers of the Fijian chief strongly suggest the estrangement of a divine spirit on a river-side forest landscape, they also implies a *sau* (the divinity attributed to a sacred stranger) that brings symbolic summit to an up-sloping forest floor. In effect, the *mana* of the chief's divinity adds finitude and closure to convergent clans whose final movements through the forest have already begun to look upwards (if not actually climb). The result is a village, enclosed as a bunch of clans (*qali*) and perched at the base of a mountain with the deity sat on its top. In this way, changed by the incorporation of the sacred strangers, 'new villages' form a topographic simulacrum of the timeless mountain state of Nakauvadra, a fact driven home by the fact that, as Hocart noted, the role of the chief is not to command but to motionlessly sit and look down, as Lord Degei initially did, and indeed to sit silently (he has a 'talking chief') whilst his subject clans with their rooted and animal ancestries (*vu*) grow upwards towards him, delivering offerings of plant and animal as signs of their organic strength. To strip this configuration of this cosmological imagery and sociologically frame the juxtaposition of chief and clans as 'human social hierarchy' would be to overlook most of its indigenous properties and tendencies. Rather, in comprehending its significant behaviour, the ritual relation has to be analysed as the institution of a 'regime of identical sociability' (Descola 2013:87), and indeed as the technical mimicry of biological and divine imagery germane to the imagining of Nakauvadra. (1). On this basis, the mission of Fijian chieftaincy is precisely to bring about the elevation and incorporation of fallen human beings into extraordinary bodies, bodies composed of the heads of gods, the lower limbs of animals, and the roots and trunk of

plants. These are syntheses that socially re-assemble in the village relations appropriate to the timeless state of the Nakauvadra quasi-unity.

The first of these extraordinary male ritual bodies is brought into being by drinking *yaqona*, a beverage prepared from the massively rooted plant *Piper methysticum*. In Fiji, *yaqona* ceremonial begins by juxtaposing the two tiers of the ritual polity: initially, chiefs sit proudly ‘above’ as chiefly incarnations of the stranger-chief, whilst common men sit deferentially ‘below’ as a divided and differentiated assemblage of clans and their tree-like rooted origin ancestors (*vu*). But, then the *yaqona* ritual moves conspicuously towards a vocal union of speciated human subjects and the chiefly god, a union referred to as ‘reconciliation’ (*nai soro*). Why reconciliation? Because, whilst empirically, real disputes are brought to an end by bringing quarrellers to drink with the chief (Abramson 2005), in many parts of Fiji, the rites are also said to secure the reconciliation of elder and younger brothers who fought in Nakauvadra, one the ancestor of the chief, the other the ancestor of the ‘eye of the land’ (herald to all of the common clans). The implication is that, fusing the vertical planes of paradise on a cosmic scale, the rites manage to subsume local rifts and splits on the scale of the social, restoring the whole of the village to the space-time of the original quasi-whole. What is then referred to with reverence as *yaqona bulabula* (‘kava alive, alive’) is that extraordinary botanical presence on the lower slopes of the fallen world which – as ominously kinked as the pandanus itself (see fig.3) - nonetheless possesses the miraculous property of being able to terrestrially restore at the heart of its ritual, the vital timelessness of a Paradise, headed by male divinity.



Fig 3 *yaqona* and its roots

The same is true of a second ritual body which is edibly rather than ‘drinkably’ crystallised. Pigs or, these days, cows are casually slaughtered at the edge of the village and presented whole to the chief by the oratorical ‘eye of the land’. The edible animal is cooked underground in an earth-oven (*lovo*) by the men or stewed for the feast by the women and received in this form by the chief. The chief sits at the head of the feast and is said to be the ‘head’ (*na ulu*) of the festive company. He also belongs to the clan whose special cut of meat is always the animal’s head: as head of the animal that he is head of the festive company. Moreover, , each clan is allotted a particular portion of the animal to be eaten at the feast and to be taken home: some get the legs, some the side, some the belly and so on. The prevalent image then is of convergent clans finally coming together in the resurrected wholeness of the animal they cook and ingest, headed by the divinity of the chief and totalised by his *mana*. In effect, a divine human-animal hybrid is the product of this edible transformation, supplementing in ritual time the presence of the divine human-plant hybrid precipitated in the liquidity of the *yaqona*. And, where we can agree with Bakhtin (1968/1984) that the anomalous hybrids and biological excesses of the medieval European carnival instantiated a break-down of boundaries and the promiscuous gushing of life-force through and out of the orifices of perishable bodies, here we

have to insist upon the opposite: namely, that Fijian lordly feasts technically re-create a hybrid body in the upper village whose parts are held tightly together by the timeless concentrate of a *mana* that demands the strictest protocols of embodiment

And secondly, to the Lady! If *mana* in men unifies by statically encompassing difference within festively inclusive collective bodies, *mana* in women rolls out the avian axis of paradisiacal unity by penetrating the village at multiple points, distributing the vital power of the sacred stranger through the flamboyant transmission of preciously durable objects (*iyau*). Sexually to start with, through the gifted virginity of the bride to individualised men, this transmission transfers stranger-divinity in gift-form to the monads it brings into being. Prime amongst these objects is the whale tooth (*tabua*). One Serean story relates how, upon disembarking, The Lady of Waimaro was taken into a house where she turned into a *tabua*, a whale's tooth. She was moistened with coco-nut oil, wrapped up in a strip of bark cloth, then a piece of mat hemmed with feathers, and then placed inside a wooden box, hidden under a bed in the sacred back part of a house. A fire broke out and she jumped out of her box, out of the house, and ran across the ceremonial ground to take up her place in another house, another wrapping of bark cloth and mat, and another box. In effect, objectified but un-ownable at any one site, indestructible female *mana* moves from ethereal exteriority to sites deep within the village, circulating obligatorily through them all, 'dividualising' monads within relations of incalculable indebtedness and perennial circulation (Wagner; Strathern).

Moreover, the deep-penetration of the terrestrial plane of the village polity by the sexualised *mana* of women is facilitated by an accompanying circulation of similarly indestructible, moveable products of women's manufacture (bark-cloth and mats especially). So that, on the first day of their marriage, when brides – each strongly symbolised as The Lady of Waimaro – carry a bunch of whale's teeth across the village green to the groom, they are festooned in bark-cloth and covered in feather-hemmed mat, visibly bringing back to life and personifying the sacred bundle of female sacra found in every household box of treasures. Immediately after, the house built for the couple is laid with mats (after a ceremony specifically called 'the laying of the mats') and surrounded on its inner walls with bark-cloth: so that the newly-weds themselves come to occupy a space which replicates at the level of the house the ornate body of the ceremonial bride on the ceremonial green and the mummified body of the whale tooth in the box (3). In effect, the *mana* of the bride gives rise to a circulatory flow of indestructible objects destined to wrap mortal bodies 'of the land' inside of bundles of manufactured and transmissible timelessness. Moreover, everywhere she circulates and externalises her *mana* in the formation of these object-enveloped bodies, the goddess also spawns a domain of women's manufacturing of the same special objects. In this domain, fleshy growth is very deliberately desiccated to be technically transmuted into nearly-eternal textile (i.e. mulberry bark into bark-cloth, pandanus leaf into mat, bird feathers into the hemming for mats), all to secure the wrapping of every fleshy body in the village, every wall, every floor and, finally, every grave with the timeless *mana* of women.

Crucially, whilst incarnate in the object-figure of the bride the Lady of Waimaro has her own mode of imparting *mana* to the terrestrial realm, she is not an autonomous figure. The wrapping of fleshy bodies with timelessly transformed plant and feather adds to the encompassment of these same bodies by the *mana* of the chiefly counterpart, but is also subordinate. And, this subordination translates into familiar scenarios which make visible – in the telling of lore and on the ceremonial green – the true relation between the transformative practices of the Lord and Lady of Waimaro. Firstly, it is widely known that a small whale-bone figurine of The Princess of Waimaro is hidden away in the most chiefly village in the Waimbuka river valley, in the house of the 'real' Lord of Waimaro. And he, to be sure, is not hidden! Additionally, all villages of Waimaro district (and elsewhere) annually put forward a strikingly adorned young unmarried woman in the Princess of Waimaro tax competition, where the tax-

bride backed by the most monies is officially presented to the Lord of Waimaro (the provincial chief) as the 'real' Princess to be his. In effect, each modality of the princess – hidden, embodied, displayed and economically re-composed – indicate that, whilst The Lady-Princess circulates *mana* back and forth on her own axis, her objectified stranger-divinity is nonetheless to be comprehended as the female part of a high-placed male-female couplet of which she is the subordinate but elastically mobile partner. Consequently, as much inside the ritual polity as in Nakauvadra a long time ago, she is an entity possessed by male divinity incarnate but stretched to the limits of possession by the properties of her nature (avian in paradise, gift-like in the polity). In this way, the circulation of the female gift within the ritual polity mimics the tethered flight of Turukawa in paradise and resonates with its portent.

The strong suggestion transmitted to those who inhabit the ritual polity is that, whilst descendants are bound to exist terrestrially outside of Nakauvadra (which is long disintegrated), practices suggested by narrative memory can nevertheless lead to the replication and capture of some of its timelessness. Through the formation of ceremonial bodies that bind organic life-forms to the lordly summit of the cosmos, and through the wrapping of human persons in the desiccated transformations of organic life promoted and circulated by women, the Fijian ritual polity re-assembles the conditions under which human descent lines can once again be woven into intimate relations with vital - because enduring - cosmic entities.

CONCLUSION: TECHNIQUES, VITAL PROCESSES AND THE VILLAGE PARADISE 'MACHINE'

These considerations lead us to a striking conclusion: namely that, rather than being a life-giving mechanism, channelling life-force into an otherwise decaying nexus of human relations, the Fijian village ritual polity is constructed as a *paradise 'machine'*. As such, its polity assembles rooted and motile species, human beings, sacred objects and rootless stranger gods in a lower cosmic space that privileges unity and perpetuity over senescence and death, and promotes timelessness over the dislocation of totality and the subsequent punctuation of time. It is in this context (at the important Western Polynesian junction of forest and sea/sky) and to this end, that relations between life-forms, objects and the techniques and innovations that synthesise them, achieve their indigenous significance.

For the village as a whole, this has not meant the perfect re-institution of primordial Nakauvadra in all of its paradisiacal singularity (which, though, has been the historic rationale of many Fijian village cults, Kaplan 1995; Abramson 2013) as much as the attempt to recuperate as many of its cosmic attributes as possible. Thus, the gods of Nakauvadra have receded to be replaced by more familiar Christian mimics; the ancestral twinship that sought possession of the divine has vanished; and human beings have been thrown into an ecologically lower world where relations that defy time have to be separated out from regular biological processes of decay and destruction. It is in this context, that the singular technical process required to extract organic and objectified forms of timelessness out of senescent nature described in the paper have had to be invented and perfected over time. Such techniques (for making bark-cloth and mats, for procuring whale teeth and embellishing them with coconut fibre, for growing, mixing, serving and ritualising *yaqona*, for preparing earth-ovens, for specially butchering meat): far from being mythically precedented, these techniques for the production of timelessness had to be innovated on the strength of quests for appropriate desiccating, calcifying and ossifying possibilities hidden within the local ecosystem (Levi-Strauss 1985). Also, ways had to be found of fashioning extraordinary ritual bodies in the village, bodies which morphologically approximate the human-like ancestral and divine forms of that first upper world

Looking back to the beginning, as the most culturally influential Fijian origin narratives indicate, technique and manufacture are negatively deprecated. This is because the momentous manufacture of an infamous bow and arrow led ineluctably to an archetypal act of violence, theft and death that initiated the catastrophic disintegration of the timeless upper world. In truth, though, the first manufacture triggered not only the end of paradise but, indirectly, the birth of human being proper upon the horizontal plane of the lower world. And, where in this village-based world, human beings try to reverse the tragedy of dialectically unified origins, they deploy the manufacture of novel objects and the innovation of ritual techniques to shape and achieve their aim.

Saliently, therefore, in both the humanised world of the ancestors (the former upper world) and the ancestral world of human beings (the contemporary lower world of villages), manufacture functions as a modality of vital process and as a transformer of vital states. Of course, making goods in the village does also produce objects of value that, before they are assigned their precise place in ritual action, appear artefactually in the inactive state of prestige objects, treasure, emblems of ethnicity and so on. However, once ritually activated by way of techniques that characteristically mediate the here-and-now with timeless origins, crafted material culture and ritual technique alike work to cosmically re-subsume human being to the pre-historic timelessness of these origins.

In this paper, only techniques that have been designed to re-capture vital forces of original unity have been considered. To take the matter further would be to confront the destructive logic and technical excesses of the village sorcerer whose subversion of the techniques of *yaqona* ritual – heaping death, suspicion and divisive violence upon fraternal relatives – re-enacts on the plane of the human, the archerous treachery of original twin-ship. (Primordial twins and contemporary sorcerers both steal, divide and kill with the help of woody plants) We would also find that, in the hands of the great paramount chiefs of the pre-colonial period, the massive deployment of woody and mother-of-pearl weaponry – displayed in every museum of note in the world – spectacularly deified these great chiefs and their armies, just as they repeatedly destroyed and scattered disobedient lower forms, in the same haughty, angry manner of the great Nakauvadra god.

What this shows, then is that the history of Fijian technique and manufacture on this primordial trajectory is, decisively, a history of vitally unified human and human-like states, of their rupture, re-assembly and, through jealousy and sorcery, their further rupture. The paradoxical result is, that to be ‘out of history’ and to be timeless, to try and avoid the ruptures that constantly throw them into ‘time-full’ exile, Fijian humanity must quest more and more within it. In particular, it must – as it has done for a couple of centuries - scrutinise its contacts with Europeans for syncretic solutions to its own indigenous problem, finding modified ways of securing the perfect union of humanity, plant and animal forms, of eternal objects and divinity against the depredations of sorcery, jealousy and death. *Or*, as the advent of new-wave Pentecostalism advocates, it must move radically against ‘tradition’ and material culture to strictly separate the fate of human life from the life, death and technical transfiguration of other species and syncretic gods.

For, nowadays, with the advent of charismatic Protestant religion, a purely human space is sculpted out of cosmos that is strongly individualised, de-speciated and significantly cut off from both the eternity of species-being and the social replication of divinity in extraordinary bodies and indestructible gifts. The path is then opened for direct, unmediated participation in the timeless life of Spirit.

NOTES

1. Eric Hirsch discovered a similar three-way mimicry of original unity, natural species and human social relations amongst the Fuyge of Papua New Guinea who build *gab* ritual platforms that unite dispersed persons, food and wealth, to strongly mimic both the *gab* platforms of the bower-bird that, magpie-like, concentrate a plethora of widely dispersed objects *and* the original ‘unity’ of the realm of *tidibe* creator-beings which was the prototypical *gab*: Hirsch 1985.)
2. Graves are the same: the corpse is mummified in bark-cloth and matting and a *tabua* ideally included. And mats and bark-cloth are placed over the grave before it is cemented over

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