Silver linings around dark clouds: Tourism, Covid-19 and a return to traditional values, villages and the *vanua*

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Abstract: The global pandemic has adversely affected tourism globally, particularly in small island states heavily dependent on tourism. The closure of borders to regular flights for over a year in places such as Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands and Vanuatu, where this research was undertaken, has resulted in massive job losses. Many tourism employees have left the once-bustling tourist hubs, returning to villages and family settlements. Such clear urban to rural migration behaviours do not dominate movement patterns in the Pacific, but are an important and enduring strategy when shocks strike. In the case of the pandemic-induced migration to villages, former tourism workers have had to engage in a complicated process of adapting to the communal setting, employing new – as well as traditional – strategies to sustain a livelihood. Thus, this paper will discuss how the pandemic has influenced return migration patterns in the Pacific, and the implications of this shift. Findings suggest that, despite their financial struggles, people have adapted to life in their ancestral homes by rekindling their relationships with kin and increasing their engagement on their customary land. They have relearned about traditional Indigenous knowledge, diversified their skills and reconnected with their social and ecological systems. This spiritual homecoming observed in the Pacific ultimately shows that there can be silver linings to the dark clouds of the current disorder.

Keywords: culture, Pacific Islands, pandemic, resilience, return migration, village

Introduction

Covid-19 has had significant economic impacts globally, with the International Monetary Fund (2021: 1) referring to 'a severe collapse in 2020 that has had acute adverse impacts on women, youth, the poor, the informally employed and those who work in contact-intensive sectors'. These factors have meant the tourism industry has been dealt a particularly brutal blow, being 'one of the hardest hit [sectors] by the crisis to date' (Barkas *et al.*, 2020: 3). The near-collapse of the global tourism system resulting from Covid-19 has revealed tourism's vulnerability to sudden shocks, ushering in difficulties for businesses and dependent communities. In particular, small island states which rely heavily on international tourism as a source of foreign exchange earnings, including those in the Pacific, have been dealt a massive blow to their economies.

Before the global pandemic struck, tourism's dominance as a national livelihood source was projected to grow consistently in the Pacific (Cheer *et al.*, 2018). International arrivals to six Pacific Islands increased by up to 50% from 2005 to 2015 (Everett *et al.*, 2018). In 2019, tourism provided over US$ 1.5 billion to South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO) member countries while employing around 5 million people directly or indirectly (SPTO, 2019). In the more established tourism destinations of Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands, tourism accounted for between 38% and 70% of their gross domestic product (SPTO, 2019). The industry was responsible for one in every four net jobs in Vanuatu (WTTC, 2021) and one in every three jobs in Cook Islands (SPTO, 2019). Thus not surprisingly, the tourism sectors in these islands have been devastated by the pandemic. Moreover, Pacific economies as a whole

have faced enormous challenges, partly based on their heavy reliance on this one industry. Economic activity in the Pacific region declined by more than 5% in 2020, with the bulk of the decline concentrated in industries such as tourism, while per capita incomes fell by 9%: this has set standards of living back by around a decade (Dayant, 2021).

This paper will focus on the physical and metaphorical journeys and adaptations that Pacific peoples who are normally reliant on tourism income undertook in order to sustain their lives and well-being during the pandemic. Despite their struggles, there are indications that Indigenous people in the Pacific have adapted to the economic challenges they face in a range of ways and shown signs of being resilient in terms of livelihoods through the pandemic's initial stages (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021). Many tourism employees have left the once-bustling tourist hubs, returning to villages and family settlements instead of contending with the overwhelming pressures of urban life without cash income. The adaptive processes involved in such urban to rural migration patterns deserve to be discussed particularly as they go against the dominant flow of the rural to urban migration experience in the Pacific since the 1970s (Movono *et al.*, 2018). That said, urban to rural migration has been observed as a coping strategy during past stresses and shocks, as will be revealed below.

Hence, we explore the complex process of how unemployed tourism sector workers and business owners in the Pacific have returned to the *vanua* (to be explained further below) as a means of adapting to the loss of income. We will examine how the loss of tourism as a livelihoods source has spurred adaptive processes whereby people seek sustenance and comfort within their traditional knowledge systems and resources. This paper will begin by discussing the body of knowledge on tourism, adaptivity and livelihoods before outlining this study's methodologies and findings. Insights are drawn from research conducted in several Pacific island countries. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate how the pandemic has influenced return migration patterns in the Pacific, its impacts on the communal setting and how people are reinvigorating traditional social and ecological systems in order to sustain their well-being and their livelihoods.

Literature review

Livelihoods and adaptation

The sustainable livelihoods approach (SLA) (Scoones, 2009) allows for complex phenomena such as tourism and livelihoods change (in this case, emanating from Covid-19) to be examined at the community level (Mbaiwa and Stronza, 2010). This approach is also valuable because it considers Indigenous communities' inherent capacities and knowledge systems as part of empirical inquiry (Wu and Pearce, 2013). Livelihoods comprise of activities, assets (such as natural, physical, human, social and financial capital) and entitlements to provide a living (Chambers, 1995). Using the SLA as a theoretical framework allows this study to examine people's functions and alternatives they might pursue to achieve desired outcomes. In this regard, the importance of migration as a strategy to support people's livelihoods has been clearly established (de Haan, 1999). Understanding adaptive behaviours is important during a crisis such as Covid-19, to see how people whose livelihoods depend heavily on tourism are coping. In this way, the SLA can be deployed to understand people's changes in behaviour during a significant livelihood disruption, including how they are utilising different resources or assets, pursuing new livelihood activities and engaging in different migratory behaviours.

Helmore and Singh (2001) and Mbaiwa and Sakuze (2009) propose that an integrated approach to livelihoods is necessary to capture a society's embedded characteristics and identify people's adaptive strategies. As such, this study seeks to push the bounds of livelihoods theory by exploring the complex social and cultural labour exerted as people transition from a relatively affluent lifestyle based on tourism work, to the traditional setting. This approach thus opens an opportunity to fill a gap in knowledge about how former tourism workers adapt to life in the face of livelihoods disruptions caused by border closures. The findings of this study will extend the current literature by examining how livelihood activities work in the case of return migration, that is, going back to one's village.

In this respect the SLA, which is sometimes described as static, can be made more fluid and

responsive if it aligns with complex adaptive systems (CASs) theory. Integrating systems thinking steers away from a potentially narrow focus on the technical nature of livelihoods and development, ultimately requiring a more holistic lens that would identify signs of adaptivity within a system (Holland, 2006; Wu and Pearce, 2013). Adaptive strategies are loosely defined as adjustments that people make in their livelihood systems to allow difficult circumstances to be endured or overcome (Tao and Wall, 2009). CAS thus has the potential to show how specific shocks to the macro global tourism system can have very complex implications at the micro or communal level (Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Holland, 2006). Helmore and Singh (2001) express that adaptive strategy is often based on local knowledge systems. This study hopes to draw more attention to the value of local knowledge systems as we consider how people adapt to multiple social, ecological and cultural structures (Byrne, 1998). Our attention to spatial movement connects the pandemic-induced return migration with the SLA and CAS theories.

Return migration and reconnection with the land

Pacific people have always been migrants, moving between their islands for thousands of years before Europeans arrived (Hau'ofa, 1994). They did this for trade, to establish social connections and occasionally, to engage in battle (Lee, 2009). In recent decades, migration in the Pacific has mainly consisted of outward migration. People travel from their villages to the towns and from towns to places overseas, primarily to seek better education and pursue economic opportunities (Bedford, 1980; Connell, 2010), often sending back remittances to their families (Connell and Brown, 2005). This trend is exemplified by 129 150 Samoans living abroad in 2013, almost half of their population (ILO, 2015), while 62 000 Cook Islanders lived in New Zealand in 2013, over three times the Cook Island population (Walrond, 2015). Those who move away often actively maintain social and cultural ties with those in their home countries and, as Connell (2010) notes, they can play a vital role in sustaining peripheral populations by supporting their kin who are still based in villages in remote areas. Those sending remittances back to their families typically express intent to return to their homelands at some point in the future (Bedford and Hugo, 2008). Thus while Pacific peoples have increasingly established themselves on foreign shores, there are signs that they still have strong ties to their ancestral places. As Marshall explains when reflecting on mobilities of people on a remote atoll in Micronesia, 'People are no longer bound to places but they are still bound up in them' (2004: 145, cited in Connell, 2010: 123). *Return migration*, whereby people go back to their country of origin or their habitual residence after leaving it (International Organization for Migration, 2019a), is thus a strong trend among Pacific peoples. Most research into this issue examines return migration over international borders (Bedford and Hugo, 2008; Maron and Connell, 2008), but this return movement is important within Pacific countries as well.

Bedford and Hugo (2008) argue that there is a need for a deeper appreciation of complex systems of mobility at work in the Pacific, which extend beyond out-migration and return migration to re-migration and forms of circular migration, both within and across borders. Traditionally, for example, there was a strong trend towards *circular migration* in some places, whereby the movements lack the intention of a permanent change of residence (Zelinsky, 1970, cited in Bedford, 1980: 31). That is, some people would regularly move away from their home and then return for reasons such as periodic employment, to engage in market activities or for socio-cultural reasons (Bedford, 1980; Chapman, 1991). O'Meara (1995), for example, explains how Samoans living in urban areas would periodically return to their village homes to cultivate gardens which established a record of land use, as a way of re-asserting their rights to a share of the land. In contemporary times, circular migration is particularly evident across borders with the establishment of seasonal employment schemes which bring Pacific peoples to New Zealand and Australia to engage in the horticulture and viticulture industries for a fixed number of months (Gibson et al., 2013).

Sometimes overlapping with circular migration, the term *internal migration* is often used in the Pacific to cover contexts in which people move within their own country to seek

improvements in their lives, deal with challenges or for other reasons. The dominant direction is rural to urban migration. Less is known and understood about the scale of internal migration in comparison with international migration, as no formal borders are crossed where statistics are automatically collected (International Organization for Migration, 2019a: 108). Motivations for internal migration in the Pacific are similar to those for international migration, that is, people are often seeking better work opportunities or education (Naidu and Vaike, 2016; Thornton *et al.*, 2020). In most Pacific states there has been a solid movement over time from rural to urban areas, and this often involves a shift from smaller and more peripheral islands to larger islands with urban centres (Bedford, 1980; Connell, 2010). Climate change threats appear to have increased this tendency for internal migration among Pacific Islanders, especially due to rising sea levels which cause erosion, saltwater intrusion and flooding (Locke, 2009; Hermann and Kempf, 2017). To date, most of the migratory response to climate change within countries has seen people moving away from the coast to higher places, or to urban areas (Tabe, 2019; Roland and Curtis, 2020).

While rural to urban migration has been the dominant direction of movement in the past, urban to rural migration also occurs at times: here is where return migration can coincide with internal or circular migration within a country's borders. This might occur when urban dwellers are facing hardships, if they are required to meet cultural obligations, or for other reasons when they wish to reconnect with their home villages. For example, it is very common for those who retire from the public service or other employment in Pacific island towns, something that is often required by employers around the relatively young age of 55 or 60, to return to their villages to live, often setting up small businesses and/or taking on leadership roles in their community.

In terms of countries which have experienced return migration to rural areas in the face of Covid-19, India has often been used as an example. Labourers, informal sector workers and others working or studying in urban centres had their earnings and aspirations undermined by sudden lockdowns. Many tens of thousands of people thus travelled to rural villages where some have land upon which they can build their livelihoods or they can get assistance from family and community support structures (Choudhury and Joarder, 2020; Dandekar and Ghai, 2020; Parveen and Mamgain, 2020; Sikdar and Mishra, 2020; Singh *et al.*, 2020).

Linking the threads of Pacific people's mobilities and ties to their ancestral lands, our research has identified a renewed trend occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, with unemployed hospitality and tourism workers from several Pacific Island countries returning to their villages. They have chosen to connect with the *vanua* at this time, going to a place where social relations and customary practices are strong and they can rely on traditional resources and support networks to survive (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021). This is urban to rural migration, which is counter to the dominant tendency. Interestingly, similar trends have occurred – even if not on the same scale – in the past in response to periods of economic downtown, natural disasters and civil unrest. For example, over 35 000 people (almost 9% of the population) moved away from their place of residence in Solomon Islands in the late 1990s due to ethnic tensions in Honiara and surrounds (Global IDP Project, 2004). They often moved to be near their family and customary land, where the 'wantok system' could come into play:

> The wantok system is a traditional system of share and care based on the notion of reciprocity within the extended family. As such, it acts as a safety net in times of natural and man-made disasters like the social unrest on Guadalcanal … Under the wantok system, members of the extended family were welcomed to occupy homes and share resources including food items, until they are able to fend for themselves …. The extended family system readily made available land for building houses and gardening as every Solomon Islander has the right to use land within the tribal land. (Global IDP Project, 2004: 49–50)

While the return to rural areas during periods of economic crisis or other shocks might support the notion of Taylor (1987) that returning to subsistence agriculture provides a handy 'safety net', the reality is far more complex. Such economic rationalism in framing the issue

over-emphasises the economic dimension of ties to the village and *vanua*, while underplaying the reality of enduring social relations, cultural practices and economic activities that are interwoven with people's identities and belief systems.

This paper describes the phenomenon of urban to rural migration within Pacific countries as an adaptive strategy in relation to the pandemic, and examines how these urban to rural migrants contend with the complex changes accompanying such a move. It is important not to romanticise the possibilities for rural dwellers to be able to support their urban kin, nor the challenges of both parties to adapt to life together in a customary setting (Connell, 2006). There are many ways in which former tourism workers are supported within their home communities, but there are also social, cultural, ecological and economic challenges to face as they move from their tourism hubs to their villages.

The meaning of 'return to the vanua'

This paper's 'return to the *vanua*' title speaks to the embedded elements of a *vanua*. *Vanua* – commonly translated as 'land' – is a Fijian term which embraces the land and people and their connections. There are terms with similar meanings in many Pacific countries, for example, *fonua* in Tonga, '*enua* in the Cook Islands and *whenua* for NZ Māori (Batibasaga *et al.*, 1999). *Vanua* is far more complex and all-encompassing than a Western view of land: it includes cultural, social, spiritual, values and beliefs, tradition, history and customs, and it also interlinks the natural and supernatural worlds (Ravuvu, 1983; Batibasaga *et al.*, 1999; Tuwere, 2002; Movono, 2017). Thus classical Fijian scholars define the *vanua* as an amalgamated entity that can sustain people spiritually, economically and culturally (Nayacakalou, 1975; Ravuvu, 1983). Ravuvu (1983: 70), for example, stressed that,

> It (vanua) does not mean only the land (qele) area one is identified with, and the vegetation, animal life, waters and coasts (qoliqoli) and other objects on it, but it also includes the social and cultural system. The people, the traditions and customs, beliefs and values, and the various other institutions are established with the aim of achieving harmony, solidarity and prosperity within a particular social order.

> Its social and cultural dimensions are a source of security and confidence as it provides a sense of identity and belonging. To most Fijians, the idea of parting with one's vanua or land is tantamount to parting with one's life.

In effect, the *vanua* is considered a point of origin and a place where people have their roots, with which they are obliged to maintain intergenerational connections. This solid connection to *vanua* attracts urban dwellers from within Pacific countries, as well as diaspora from all parts of the world; the latter often make an annual or periodic pilgrimage to their village, leaving bustling metropolitan centres to visit their customary lands, extended family and clans. In the Solomon Islands, civil servants are given leave and allowances to travel to their towns and provinces over the Christmas holidays as part of work entitlements. Similarly, a high proportion of international visitor numbers to the island destinations of Tonga and Samoa are 'VFRs', that is, Tongans and Samoans living abroad who are 'Visiting Friends and Relatives' (Scheyvens, 2007). As suggested in the literature review on migration above, these trends of remaining connected to one's homeland and village no matter where you live, and returning periodically, are common throughout the Pacific and have become part of the routine of the urban diaspora (Ravuvu, 1983; Gershon, 2007).

A 'return to the *vanua*' by former tourism employees and business owners often involves a physical journey from a more urbanised, tourism-centric place to a rural village. In other cases whereby tourism workers were already living in their home village which was close to a tourism enterprise where they worked, a 'return to the *vanua*' is more metaphorical: it means they have reconnected spiritually, culturally and materially with their *vanua*. Here they find a place that provides a vital safety net during challenging times; however, it is far more than just an economic safety net. While former tourism workers in the Pacific have indeed suffered economically during the pandemic, this study will explore the concept of *vanua* as a social and ecological support mechanism for them. In doing so, we provide insights into how socio-cultural and spatial processes interact during times of sudden shocks to the tourism system.

Methods: Adaptive research in practice

This research was initiated out of concerns shared by the authors about the impacts of the economic slowdown caused by Covid-19 on the tourism-dependent communities of the Pacific. The lead authors have been actively researching tourism in the Pacific for over three decades, with Movono having deep connections with people affected by the pandemic. This study is part of our commitment as researchers, inspired by social justice methodologies (Tedlock, 2000; Smith, 2012; Scheyvens *et al.*, 2014), to interpret the tourism phenomenon in a manner that is emancipatory and genuine in its concern for Pacific peoples' sustainable development.

The Pacific Vanua research framework (PVRF) was adopted to guide the methodological orientation of this study and is woven into its ethical considerations (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The PVRF attempts to localise research methods and recognise cultural sensitivities; as such, it aligns with Smith's (2012) call for a need to decolonise research involving Indigenous peoples. We thus situate Pacific people at the centre of research and use their systems of knowledge and understandings as the basis for inquiry and investigation (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Such an approach dovetails SLA and CAS theory, which seek to broaden understanding of complex social and ecological phenomena, providing an appropriate platform for empirical research on Pacific peoples.

The research is set in five tourism-reliant countries in the Pacific, namely, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands and Fiji. A multi-country approach was deemed necessary to capture a snapshot of how Pacific Islanders, once dependant on tourism for their livelihoods, are coping and changing. While the countries are different in many ways, the point of comparison is that all of the *communities* studied depended on tourism for a significant part of their household income. Thus we knew they faced similar challenges to adapting to life without this income due to closed borders.

Pursuing such an endeavour under a global lockdown ultimately required research adaptivity to meet the challenges of restricted travel, which made fieldwork impossible for the research team. Innovations in sourcing quality data about tourism-dependent communities' experiences were necessary. Similar to other social scientists having to adapt to the pandemic circumstances, we came up with practical solutions to conducting fieldwork remotely (Krause *et al.*, 2021). Our plan for data collection involved three key components.

First, the time-sensitive, restrictive and fluid nature of developments arising from the pandemic meant that administering an online survey was the most appropriate tool for collecting data quickly from various countries in the early stages of the pandemic. Tracy (2013) notes that surveys can be valuable in reaching a large geographical area, relatively easy to circulate on multiple mediums and are not too demanding on participant time. The purpose of the online survey, administered between June and September 2020, was to have an expeditious means of accessing the views of various people in different Pacific countries who had been impacted by the decline in tourism. The survey asked questions about the economic impacts of the pandemic on individuals, their households and tourism-related businesses and how it had affected various aspects of people's well-being, as well as asking them about subsequent adaptive responses. There were both open and closed questions. The survey link was distributed using email lists of contacts of the researchers, and tourism-related social media sites (e.g. Facebook groups) in each of the five countries.

Survey respondents totalled 106 people, of which 59% were male, 37% female, while 4% preferred to self-identify. Sixty percent of respondents were between the ages of 20 and 49, while 40% were over 50 years of age. Interestingly, many of the respondents were (or had been until border closures) long-term tourism industry employees, occupying a broad range of roles from management, business owners to kitchen staff. Just over one quarter (27%) of respondents owned a tourism business, while 58% were employed in tourism. The remaining 15% were neither but their views were also solicited because the researchers encouraged anyone living in tourism-dependent communities to fill out the survey in order to examine wider impacts. Of the employees, 58% were involved in large-scale accommodation (hotels/resorts), with groups of others from aviation,

ground transportation, smaller accommodation, tour operators and 'other' tourism-related businesses such as taxis. Survey participants engaged strongly in the open-ended questions which provided considerable insights into people's situations and how they were quoting.

Second, to complement and run alongside the online survey, the researchers engaged six Pacific-based research associates (RAs) located in the case study countries (two in Fiji, and one in each of the other countries) to conduct interviews in specific tourism-reliant communities. The RAs were recruited using the authors' professional connections and networks. Consisting of five females and one male, the RAs were approached because of their prior research experience and pre-existing links with the specific case study communities. These links provided the necessary access to communities, and built on existing relationships, thus offering the ideal platform to engage in meaningful conversations with members of the communities and enabling continued research exchanges during the study period. RAs were trained via zoom about the research practice, ethics, role and benefits they would get from participating in the study. Interviews (semi-structured conversations with individuals or pairs) or *talanoa* were conducted in specific communities impacted by the downturn in tourism in each case study country. *Talanoa* in the Pacific context refers to the process where two or more people converse and share ideas and stories; this is deemed a more organic and culturally appropriate method of qualitative data collection for these contexts (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The RAs also followed appropriate cultural protocols such as organising *sevusevu* or *koha* as required and providing refreshments to participants.

Questions for participants centred on discussing the impacts of the slowdown in tourism on their families and community, and how they had adapted to the loss of income and other changes caused by Covid-19. In total, In total, 82 participants across the five countries engaged in either individual or group discussions. In particular, the RAs specifically sought out the voices of tourism workers, former workers, women, youths and elders in the communities. Their identities were protected by use of descriptors, as seen in the Findings section below, rather than actual names. All RAs provided written summary notes and quotations to the research team, while some offered audio recordings and photographs in addition to the written report.

Third, follow-up *talanoa* were conducted virtually, via Zoom or phone, with 11 of the original survey participants: from Fiji, Samoa, Cook Islands and Niue. The survey had concluded with a question soliciting voluntary participation in such interviews. Consequently, such interviews took place in early 2021 to see how people were coping almost a year after the pandemic had closed Pacific borders.

The information was analysed thematically at the end of the data collection phase to highlight key themes relevant to this study. This was an organic, circular process involving coding data, searching for meaning and interpreting the data (O'Leary, 2017). We worked with reports from the RAs along with notes taken by the key researchers during meetings with the RAs, transcripts from interviews and the survey data. Key themes and sub-themes relevant to the study were signalled, and the quotes and statistics were then organised around these themes. Reflexivity was possible because the researchers continuously triangulated data from multiple sources and revisited the data for further clarification, in line with recognised advice on qualitative research practice (Tracy, 2013).

Findings

Below, we report on key themes relating to the return to the *vanua* that emerged from the research, noting both the challenges and difficulties, as well as more positive outcomes.

Loss of tourism and seeking alternatives

Tourism-dependent communities in the Pacific have suffered significant financial difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic due to closed borders and the loss of tourism-based income (Gounder, 2020). In our research, over 73% of respondents surveyed in mid-2020 said they had experienced a 'major decline' in household income, a significant figure, given that 60% of respondents were from households that relied on tourism for over half of their total income (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2020). Some tourism

operators and hotels adopted a people-centred approach focussing on workers' well-being, providing financial and social support: this occurred with Pacific Resorts in the Cook Islands, one of only a few Pacific countries in which consistent wage subsidies have been provided (Interview, resort manager, Cook Islands, February 2021). However, most tourism operators across the region succumbed to the pressures of having no business, minimal government support and were forced to close down.

A former tourism worker in Vanuatu lamented that the onset of the pandemic 'was sudden' and brought them 'much worry and anxiety', igniting their quest to find alternative income means to support their families (Interview, former cruise ship tour guide, February 2021). Another person who had previously relied heavily on income from tourism commented on the dramatic downturn in economic activity in the town of Nadi, which is adjacent to Denarau Island where a cluster of nine 5-star resorts, apartments, condominiums and an 18 hole golf course, are located:

> My wife came back last weekend, and she told me that Nadi is totally different from the vibe that we used to see before. The town is really quiet, the taxis are finding it really hard to meet their target on a weekly basis because there's no business at all. It goes to show that tourism is really affected by this pandemic, and how many people rely on tourism. (Interview, Fiji, February 2021)

The lack of international tourists has created a significant economic void in crucial tourism-related regions, affecting tourism-dependent communities across the Pacific. In the survey and *talanoa* for this research, examples were provided of people turning to loan sharks and theft to survive, and of people's inability to pay debts on tourism-related assets such as taxis or accommodation. In addition, alcoholism, violence and family disruptions were reported to be increasing in frequency (Interviews, Fiji). A feeling of having no backup plan to support their families initiated feelings of 'despair' and 'hopelessness' for people in a Solomon Islands community that previously relied on earnings from cultural performances for cruise ship passengers; this created significant family tensions

(Interviews, community on Guadalcanal, 2020). Thus a key finding across the case study communities was that people had become over-reliant on tourism. The majority of participants had focused on acquiring skills and knowledge applicable to their jobs at the hotels, influencing a lifestyle they had become accustomed to.

Study participants were, as a result, forced to seek out alternative livelihood sources. To survive the initial few weeks of the pandemic, people turned to backyard gardening, they established small businesses and used support from government and pension withdrawals to get by. However, with economic prospects no longer viable in the urban setting or the nearby places they lived, many participants reluctantly decided to leave the tourist towns and return to their communities.

Exodus: Moving back to the land and (re)learning traditional skills

Without their main means of economic support, many of those who had close links and connections to their customary lands and settlements thus decided that returning to their *vanua* or villages was a logical move. A former Fijian food and beverage manager stated that he,

> had no other choice, but to move my wife, and three kids to join my parents, two other siblings and their children in one house … although this was hard, especially for my wife, we are happy because we are all working and looking after each other together. (Interview, 2020)

Undoubtedly, access to customary land to grow food has been a major survival strategy among those who have returned to the *vanua*. Many households in communities across the study areas have reverted to utilising the land and sea to grow and harvest food. Our findings, along with work by Leweniqila and Vunibola (2020) and Farrel *et al.* (2020), demonstrate that the pandemic has forced people to reconnect with the land, reviving traditional farming practices have improved food security: 'As for the environment, I see people are respecting the land now – knowing that the land can provide for them and support them' (Interview, resort employee, Fiji, February 2021). People have been spending more time on their farms and

planting multiple crops in higher volumes, thus contributing to good health and well-being (Farrel *et al.*, 2020). A community leader in a village on the Coral Coast in Fiji noted that this was a necessity for unemployed tourism workers:

> People in my village are now planting more [whether] as individual families, in clans and as a tribe, on a scale not seen by this generation … mind you … over 90% of people worked in tourism before the pandemic. (Interview, July 2020)

Participants described how they had once forfeited knowledge related to fishing, planting, hunting and even conducting traditional rituals and ceremonies after being away from their communities working in tourism. Some had been living in other areas for several decades. They explained that the return to the *vanua* and community allowed them to reconnect with the land, spend quality time with elders, relearn their customs and traditions and specific skills around activities such as cultivating food. Having a young, productive group of people back in the villages has proven vital for communities as they band together to provide each other and the most vulnerable in their society with food and support. People can now fish, hunt, plant and grow food for themselves, providing relief for their stretched finances. According to one Samoan elder, encouraging the diversification of livelihoods skills, collective abilities and cooperation of community members has 'created an abundance of food for our community' (Interview, August 2020).

Newly learned, or revived skills, such as yam cultivation, fishing using traditional methods, weaving and traditional oil and soap making, have allowed people to be more self-reliant and decrease their reliance on supermarkets. Some are using these skills to generate income and barter with neighbouring communities. For example, former tourism workers along Fiji's Coral Coast are trading their fish and seafood with crops and mats from kin based in villages in the highlands of Navosa; this situation has led to a rekindling of long-neglected traditional ties between villages. Many have engaged with the online spaces and Facebook to reach others in the broader area (Movono *et al.*, 2021). There has been 'lots of little industrious types of things

going on around the island as people try to make little bits of money' (Interview, Tour Guide, Cook Islands, February, 2021). While some of these new businesses might be temporary, and not all people will continue to practice the traditional skills they have re-learned, others suggested this is part of a more permanent change in lifestyle for them: 'I've been very lucky. An uncle of mine has given me a piece of land, so if these things continue I can go to that, build a small house and start farming' (Interview, resort employee, Fiji, February 2021).

The social-cultural benefits of a return to the vanua

While some may argue that these responses occur as a matter of necessity, what is relatively unknown, are the complex socio-cultural processes that happen when people transition into a relatively unfamiliar environment. We need to consider how community livelihoods as part of a CAS capable of reorganisation, using embedded resources and support mechanisms. Research participants provided us with a number of different examples of communal support mechanisms. Sometimes this involved meeting people's material needs such as women's groups doing fundraising events to purchase products for those with no cash income, or youth groups helping older members of a community. A former resort employee who moved home to the Yasawa Islands in Fiji also noted that there was a heightened awareness of the needs of others:

> So, I was in the village for the past two months, and what I found was that we actually communicate with each other … so much that if there is anything [that's a problem for] … other families, we help them as well. What little we have we give it to them … We have been looking after each other.

Other times, the help was spiritual, such as church groups establishing rosters to visit and share fellowship with others. And other times again, people devoted themselves to community activities that had a sporting or social element:

for the last three weeks we've been spending our time organizing the village touch rugby team and that's over 100 people registering in the teams … we would never have been doing that, at this time, if it was a normal tourist atmosphere. (Interview, Tour Operator, Niue, February 2021)

Specific help was proffered to those who moved back to the *vanua*. As a Fijian participant reflected, 'people in the community were closer together and more united in helping families that moved back to the village'. The process of supporting those returning to the *vanua* might involve village youths working together to develop plantations and gardens for returning clan members. They would also gift them egg-laying hens and tools – a gesture of welcome and assistance to those returning to the village.

A Vanuatu tourism official describes the pandemic as 'a blessing in disguise … we are now more united because on so many levels because we can think and decide what we are meant to be doing, to serve our interests' (Interview, April 2021). This was a phenomenon that had previously been in slow decline because of the immense focus people had on tourism-based economic activity:

> [There] was the opportunity to be able to rest, [which] was something that I really appreciated because I didn't realise how much mental and physical stress that I've put into working in the tourism sector. (Interview, Fiji, February 2021)

Most participants openly share their contentment with their lifestyle change and more time to spend with their families:

> From the social side it's not having to be around the [tourism] industry and people I had to be around all the time in that working capacity, professionally. Now it's more my priority [since I have] shifted to my vanua, being involved with my family … I found that rewarding for me. (Interview, Tour Operator, Fiji, February 2021)

Another social benefit of a return to the *vanua* is that participants experienced increased giving and gifting to fellow community members based on goodwill. Some engaged in activities to grow food for others in need in their community,

while others gifted surplus from their gardens or fishing endeavours. We spoke with one young man, previously employed at a resort, who was back working on the land on his peripheral island and sending food parcels to extended family who are still living in urban centres on the main island, Viti Levu (Interview, Fiji, February 2021). Fundraising to support wider clan members became prevalent in Fiji during the pandemic's second and more deadly wave, which started in April 2021, and saw Fijians resident in Fiji and abroad using social media in a range of creative ways – for example, hosting virtual singers and bands – to raise funds for those in need (Movono *et al*., 2021).

In essence, the pandemic and the retreat of former tourism workers back to their communities has triggered a cultural renaissance of sorts, paving the way for the reinvigoration of traditional Indigenous knowledge exchanges. With most cultures and practices in the Pacific being passed orally from generation to generation, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for Pacific peoples to reflect, connect and re-establish pride in their identity while trying to ensure that no one in their families or communities is going hungry.

Challenges of the return to the vanua

However, the transition into the traditional setting has not been without difficulties. Often studies of urban to rural migration overlook the underlying and complicated adaptation process associated with people moving from a setting with more modern conveniences to a more traditional setting. Former tourism employees had in the past enjoyed a relatively affluent work setting, as well as having sufficient disposable income to shop in supermarkets and enjoy town-based entertainment, such as movie theatres; adjusting to life in the subsistence-based village setting was hard for many.

They also often need to adjust to a more rigid socio-cultural environment when moving back to a traditional village. There are expectations about what roles you should fulfil and how you should behave, and many relatives around to observe what you are doing every hour of the day. The village community undoubtedly provides you with support, but as a female tour

operator observed, you need to reciprocate by contributing in a range of ways:

> the downside is you get too involved in it [the vanua]. The Pacific is like that – everything involved with the vanua is a lot of obligation. (Interview, Fiji, February 2021)

Similarly, the experience of living with one's extended family and meeting their expectations can be a struggle. As one male participant noted, 'it was challenging to move in with my in-laws and other relatives after living independently for almost 15 years in my nuclear family' (Interview, February 2021).

Another 48-year-old former hotel worker from Fiji noted that he felt a little embarrassed having to go home to his village to be supported, after people had previously looked up to him because of his work in the tourism sector:

> It was challenging having to be without money to support my family and relatives, at first, feeling ashamed to return to the land …. [Also] hotel and office work was perceived to be more prestigious than manual labour. (Interview, February 2021)

An overwhelming majority of those interviewed revealed, however, that these were teething issues that people could overcome with support from their community and their religious beliefs and practices. Many participants reiterated the message that their faith was a source of strength and unity, as well as encouraging them to look outwards and support others. A former Samoan hotel worker summed up the sentiments of many of our participants who had returned to the *vanua*, stating that,

> It was challenging and uncomfortable at first, but now I know that we are stronger together because we can all pitch in and share the load. (Interview, August 2020)

Many of those interviewed stated that they felt 'fortunate' to be part of communities that place 'immense and often immeasurable value' (Interview, Fiji, February, 2021) on kinship systems, traditional Indigenous knowledge, customary land, resources and spirituality.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this paper have shown that the pandemic, a global shock, has indeed spurred shifts within Pacific island communal settings. The loss of international tourism has resulted in people finding themselves suddenly without jobs in the urban centres and tourism enclaves. When people live more affluent and market-driven livelihoods in tourism hubs, they often ignore specific societal functions such as traditional livelihoods activities, local knowledge systems and social connections. However, the movement of Pacific people from towns and cities to the rural areas and ancestral lands has brought them face to face with traditional society and culture, including both the support structures and obligations that come with this. Former tourism workers have had to make significant adaptations associated with returning to the communal setting and reverting to traditional livelihoods to sustain a living.

Returning to the land and sea as a source of sustenance has been incredibly valuable as a survival strategy in many villages across the Pacific during the pandemic. The diversity of resources and the socially conducive conditions have sustained people without tourism income, providing them with a social and economic safety net to fall back on. Previous research indicates that people of the Pacific are aware of changes occurring within their islands and are not mere bystanders in the process of development (Gibson *et al.*, 2013; Hermann and Kempf, 2017; Movono *et al.*, 2018); our findings corroborate that. This paper highlights that people in many of our case study communities now engage more closely with their available support systems and rely more on their traditional techniques as a means of both survival, and cultural revival. A return to the *vanua* shows how the interface between the social and natural spaces is highly important to people's resilience and well-being, as it recognises that cultural assets, social benefits and non-monetary activities are available for people, especially in the Pacific, to sustain a livelihood.

The associated transference of traditional skills and knowledge, and in many cases, the resultant abundance of food, has been confirmed by Leweniqila and Vunibola (2020) and Farrel *et al.* (2020). Less discussed, however, is

the important social and cultural revival associated with the return to the *vanua*. Similar to Chapman's (1979) research which found that returning to villages in Solomon Islands reinvigorated traditional knowledge, this study showed that the return to the *vanua* contributes to the rekindling of traditional ties and strengthening of relationships within the community. Thus, the indirect consequences of return migration have been to transfer Indigenous knowledge related to their ancestors, such as specific fishing sites, best times to plant and how to grow and/or harvest a variety of seasonal seafoods and land-based food for medicine and sustenance.

Complex systems theory helps us to understand the implications of the findings from this study. Sudden shocks such as the pandemic directly affecting the global tourism system can spur further micro-level changes within specific communities (Holling, 2001; Holland, 2006). The results of this study extend knowledge in this space, showing that people are migrating away from the urban areas to their communities for support, and that return migration, in turn, creates socio-ecological shifts at the community level. Returning to the *vanua* in 2020 and 2021 has led directly to changes in livelihoods systems (Tao and Wall, 2009) and, consequently, sparked a cultural renaissance leading to increased traditional Indigenous knowledge exchanges. An ability to respond effectively to stresses and shocks is typical of a complex and adaptive system (Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Holland, 2006), and has been demonstrated by the empirical evidence in this paper. This supports the notion that Pacific island communities are, in essence, CASs and that the global pandemic, while creating a shock at the international tourism level, has also influenced changes and initiated creative responses at the national and community level.

Using the SLA as a theoretical framework has facilitated inquiry into the various resources and entitlements people turn to in order to cope with the shocks (Scoones, 2009; Wu and Pearce, 2013). This approach recognises that Pacific communities are multi-layered and have diverse resources embedded within cultural systems that enforce custodianship of resources (Movono *et al.*, 2018). The findings have shown that while people rely on their customary resources, cultural knowledge and livelihoods skills to survive, people also rely on their faith or spirituality and emotional, social and family resources to sustain their well-being (Helmore and Singh, 2001; Movono, 2017). The results pave the way for reconsidering the SLA and framework in terms of the relevance of including spiritual resources as crucial elements required to build resilience as people transition into the local community (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021). Aligned with Duxbury *et al.*'s (2021) notion of creative forms of regenerative tourism, people have relearn traditional knowledge, enhanced relationships in the community and rekindled spiritual connections to customs. This has also improved conventional Indigenous knowledge, creating a more diversified skillset among members of the community.

While these adaptive strategies have served them well in relation to the pressures of the pandemic period, as the literature review showed this is not the first time that Pacific peoples have returned to the *vanua* in response to some form of crisis, whether this be civil unrest, cyclones, or economic pressures. Essentially, Covid-19 is one of a series of dark clouds to hit the region over the past 50 years, 'albeit a big and very dark one' as one of the reviewers of this article noted.

This less common trend in return migration from the urban, tourism-dominated setting to the traditional rural setting, brings many challenges as well as opportunities for people, as has been noted in the Indian case during the pandemic (Choudhury and Joarder, 2020). Past research in Tonga found that returnees to villages have mixed experiences: they might be respected for their perceived past successes but also admonished if they fail to conform with traditional expectations (Maron and Connell, 2008); returnees may incite 'a new sense of division, born of high expectations, frustrations and inequality' (Maron and Connell, 2008: 182). It is thus not surprising that our research found mixed sentiments among those who at first struggled to adapt to the more traditional lifestyle, relationships and obligations of their home village. These experiences provide insights into the demanding process of adapting to a new societal environment. Nonetheless, although society, culture and dynamics differ across communities and countries in the Pacific, the case study communities and participants show a trend whereby people largely responded and adapted positively to the challenging circumstances

brought on by Covid-19. This research revealed that natural, physical, financial, cultural and spiritual resources located in rural communities feature prominently as a coping tool for people across all case study communities.

The findings of this study point to other areas of research that are needed during these turbulent times. Issues of tensions in the transition back to the *vanua* during the pandemic period are worthy of attention by future researchers. Furthermore, in the past people would make the pilgrimage to their *vanua* and villages for a few weeks, only to return to their usual place of work and residence. However, it appears that the pandemic has influenced a more permanent return to the *vanua*, spurred by the need to survive but also to pursue a lifestyle that is more meaningful and culturally grounded, at least for some of our research participants. More research is needed in the coming years to see if this is a consistent trend, or if there is a strong movement back to urban areas once borders re-open and tourism returns. Once international borders open and tourism re-starts, many people will undoubtedly be lured back to their previous lives and employment: certainly, the cash income will be welcome as will the conveniences and other attractions of urban living. This might mean that the current phenomena of a return to the *vanua* could more accurately be described as 'circular migration'. Regardless, it will be interesting if future research examines whether any of the cultural, economic and social shifts that occurred during the Covid-19 era due to people's reconnection with the *vanua*, will endure. It is these things which many of our participants felt had added meaning and value to their lives.

Return migration due to the pandemic has been called by some 'a blessing in disguise' given the fact that people can now be more self-sustaining, even without their usual income, and that many have reconnected with a strong social and cultural support system. This has significant implications for sustainability and resilience because of the ability to spread productive livelihoods activities and their benefits beyond the urban periphery (Filimonau and De Coteau, 2020). The findings have implications for post-pandemic recovery that capitalises on increased uptake of more traditional livelihoods activities as a diversified source of local and national earnings. More importantly, livelihoods diversification in tourism-related communities could strengthen internal linkages and reduce livelihoods vulnerabilities when tourism resumes (Guo *et al.*, 2018; Dogru *et al.*, 2019).

Our findings further establish that return migration inspired by the pandemic involves much more than just a movement of people across demarcated zones. Instead, the global pandemic has become a catalyst for a complex process of livelihoods adjustments and socio-cultural reintegration, resulting in reinvigorated traditional knowledge systems and relationships at the community level. This provides further evidence of the durability of cultural systems and the *vanua*, the latter being revived in response to the current context. This opens many opportunities for post-pandemic tourism recovery, options that can be regarded as silver linings around dark pandemic clouds.

Acknowledgements

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