

CHRISTIANITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTION: SEA-LEVEL RISE AND RITUALISING VILLAGE RELOCATION IN FIJI

Thomas Arthur John White¹

ABSTRACT

Development studies are ambivalent about the relationship between climate change adaption and Pacific Christianity. Biblical belief about Noah's covenant and the End Times are understood to undermine risk perception, while church membership is seen to threaten cross-denominational cooperation, hampering adaptive capacity. Yet the communicative reach and charismatic authority of Pacific churches remain the envy of development specialists working on climate change. This focus on belief and institutional capital, however, neglects how Christian ritual practice can orientate and stabilise faith communities. Drawing on fieldwork in rural Fiji investigating village migration due to coastal flooding from sea-level rise, this paper shows how ritual practice strengthens community resilience when responding to climate change. In Vunidogoloa, villagers employed the Old Testament myth of Exodus to (re)create ritual responses to vent the emotional/spiritual trauma of leaving their ancestral home. Whereas in the nearby village Vunisavisavi, such ritual responses have been lacking and village relocation remained problematic.

Keywords: Christianity; development; Fiji; climate change; migration

INTRODUCTION

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fifth Assessment Report (Field *et al.* 2014) confirmed what most development workers already knew: the impacts of climate change are regressive. That is, climate change hits the poor first and hardest. Low-income communities in low-income countries inhabit geographies more vulnerable to climate hazards and lack the economic resources to pursue adaption strategies. Injustice is married to misfortune, as it is precisely those communities which have been excluded from the largesse of a carbon-based capitalism that now pay its devastating environmental costs.

As wealthier nations are starting to acknowledge this ecological debt, state and non-state development actors are directing their attention to climate change adaptation initiatives abroad.²

For coastal villages in Fiji, and across the Pacific Islands, the predominant threat is sea-level rise (Field *et al.* 2014; Mimura *et al.* 2007).³ As king tides and storm surges erode thinning beaches and breach sea-walls, the lapping sea-water turns fresh-water brackish, kills grasses and crops, and floods homes, schools, village halls, churches, and burial grounds. Stagnating water across villages then provides a breeding ground for dengue-carrying mosquitos, while flooded septic tanks risk the spread of bacterial disease (Government of Fiji 2005). As on-site adaptation strategies are pursued,⁴ special prayer groups are also formed, asking for God's mercy and deliverance from the rising sea.⁵ Many villagers explain that the changing climate is 'God's will' (Lata and Nunn 2012) and with Pentecostal churches gaining popularity across the country (Ernst 1994; Newland 2006), there is the suggestion that the End Times are near. That climate change is a political and moral problem as much as a scientific one has now been broadly accepted (Garvey 2008; Giddens 2013; Hulme 2009; Northcott 2007; Regan 2014). Yet for coastal villagers suffering from sea-level rise in Fiji, it is a religious problem too.

The relevance of religion can be especially profound when villages are forced into an adaptation strategy of last resort – relocation.⁶ Village relocations tend to be local, uphill, and away from the coast,⁷ although sacred places (*vanua tabu*), such as ancestor burial sites, must be left behind. Indigenous Fijians confess a deep spiritual attachment to their village sites (Ravuvu 1987; Tuwere 2002). It is a connection ritually reinforced through inheritance practices⁸ and inalienable communal land rights.⁹ As such the abandonment of old villages can be a painful and disorientating experience. It is in response to such psychological and material distress that Christian churches across the Pacific have mobilised their moral, spiritual, and political resources. From village relocations to inter-governmental climate summits, churches are speaking out, visiting villages, and shaping policy, carving out a major role in regional climate change advocacy.¹⁰ As climate change moves to the centre of the development agenda, and Pacific churches assume greater authority on climate change, probing questions regarding issues of expertise, representation, authority, and power are contoured by assumptions on what religion is and does.

Presently, and more generally, religion and the development sector have been enjoying a renewed cordiality. While the 'big bang' of eighteenth-century humanitarianism had its roots in religious-based social activism (Barnett 2011,

Fountain and Petersen 2018), the dominant secularisation thesis within twentieth-century sociological thought entrenched the perception that modernisation entailed the retreat of religious authority from the public sphere. As such, development and religion were generally perceived as separate, and most likely countervailing, human endeavours (Selinger 2004; Ver Beek 2000). Such a hesitancy regarding religion, however, has receded over the last fifteen years as development practitioners and scholars argue for a rapprochement based on comparative advantage and common goals (Jones and Petersen 2011; Marshall and Keough 2004; Marshall and Van Saneen 2007; Rakodi 2007; Rees 2011). For Kadz, this religious turn risks the infiltration of the development sector by proselytising ideologues pursuing singular religious identity interests (Kadz 2009). Yet Fountain and Peterson argue that the instrumentalism actually runs in the other direction. They argue it is development actors and scholars who approach religion as a resource. Religion is sought out to buttress pre-existing delivery systems or deepen the goals of development practice, though rarely to fundamentally challenge what those systems and goals might be (Fountain and Peterson 2018).

In the literature on climate change in Oceania, religion is often assessed as either an asset or obstacle to development practice. In such analyses, Pacific Christianity is presented as a set of fixed, received beliefs, with biblical literalism highlighted as a problem; or alternatively, as an assemblage of effectively self-regarding individuals and institutions, specifically the clergy and the churches. Yet, as Tania Li points out, this move to render technical social and cultural phenomena in pursuit of a development agenda plucks them from deeply embedded networks of power and meaning (2007). It is arguably for this reason that the more contextual or encompassing aspects of religion, such as where and how Christianity structures and saturates meaning-making practices in Fijian villages, or how religion substantiates villagers' identities and experiences, can get overlooked.

To elaborate on the above, this paper proceeds in two parts. The first part provides a general overview of the relationship between Christianity and climate change in the South Pacific, and involves three inter-related areas for analysis: i) the pre-existing literature on Pacific Christianity and climate change, particularly regarding religion as a barrier to climate change adaptation, ii) climate change discourse as a carrier of neo-colonial power, and iii) the positioning of the Pacific churches in response to i) and ii). The second part of the paper then offers an ethnographic analysis of two villages in rural Fiji, i) Vunidogoloa, and ii) Vunisavisavi, and their comparative experiences of village relocation due to sea-level rise. It is with reference to these case studies that attention is

drawn to the significance of religious ritual in development practice. It is also suggested, however, that to avoid worsening the wretched alienation climate change relocation causes, at least in deeply religious communities such as those in rural Fiji, it is best to engage religion as more than simply the means to developmental ends.

CHRISTIANITY: A BARRIER TO CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTION?

To date, Christian engagement – mythic, ritualistic and institutional – on matters of climate change in Fiji has received limited academic attention. This is consistent with trends across the Pacific, as regional climate change research is dominated by scientific observations of the changing climate – largely for international audiences and IPCC reports – and the development of local adaptive capacity, where, in the name of sustainability and resilience, villagers are advised on how to better preserve and utilise their dwindling natural resources. To this latter objective, however, there is an increasing recognition that adaption success is dependent on local socio-cultural and political contexts (Brace and Geoghegan 2011; Crate 2011; Granderson 2014; Jasanoff 2010). Yet to a large extent the pervasiveness of Christianity across the Pacific and its interaction with climate change, remain marginal to research trends. For example, Jon Barnett and John Campbell's seminal *Climate Change and Small Island States: Power, Knowledge and the South Pacific* mentions Christianity and the churches only once, and this regards historical social change during colonialism (2010, 34). In the chapter that addresses 'small islands' in the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report, church institutions are not mentioned at all, whereas Christian belief is only referred to obliquely, stating that 'traditional belief systems can limit adaptive capacity' (Field *et al.* 2014, 1637). This is a significant omission. In the Pacific no other organisation, state or otherwise, commands the same moral or charismatic authority, nor has access to a communications infrastructure as far reaching as the churches of the Pacific. Furthermore, Christianity is amongst the most significant cognitive frames through which Pacific Islanders align their beliefs, attitudes, allegiances and actions (Forman 1982).

Of the small number of studies that have explored the link between climate change and Christianity in Oceania, the focus has been on risk perception and risk management. This engagement has concentrated on questions such as whether belief in a personal, all-powerful God, or belief in the literal truth of the Bible, aids or hinders adaptive capacity (Donner 2007; Kempf 2014; Lata and Nunn 2012; Mortreux and Barnett 2009; Rudiak-Gould 2013). Or alternatively, they question how the interests and practices of church institutions might block or facilitate climate initiatives (Gillespie and Burns 2003; Kempf

2012; Kuruppu 2009). Their research has commonly identified areas for doubt and concern regarding the impact of Christianity on local adaptive capacity.

For example, research by Shalini Lata and Patrick Nunn in Fiji's Rewa Delta recorded a widespread belief that climate change was caused by God, with forty-four per cent of urban respondents and fifty-six per cent of rural respondents affirming this position (2012, 176). Lata and Nunn argue that the villagers' framing of climate change as an act of God's will is a harmful one:

... the problem is specifically if you believe a phenomenon to have a divine cause then not only is it pointless to try and alter it but it is also an affront to the divinity to contemplate doing so. (ibid)

The perceived failure by Rewans to recognise the long-term risk of climate change and take adaptive action was, according to Nunn and Lata, in part due to a disempowering theology. Similarly, geographers Colette Mortreux and Jon Barnett point to how Tuvaluans take literally the Old Testament Noahic Covenant – in which God promised Noah to never again flood the Earth – and refuse to accept the long-term risks of sea-level rise (2009). This use of the Noah myth is also reported in the ethnographies by Peter Rudiak-Gould in the Marshall Islands (2013) and by Wolfgang Kempf in Kiribati (2014).¹¹ Simon Donner's ethnography of a Fijian village in Matacawalevu, in the Yasawa Group, examines how villagers understand poor harvests and drought as God's punishment for insufficient Christian devotion (Donner 2007). When similar biblical beliefs are used to actually confirm climate change, as Rudiak-Gould also finds amongst the Marshallese, he names this as 'promiscuous corroboration' (2011, 50), where risk perception is rooted not in an accurate understanding of climate change, but the coincidental alignment of prefiguring ideological preferences.

Prominent Christian figures have further confirmed the use of supernatural frameworks for understanding climatic events in the Pacific. The country director for the Christian non-government organisation, Hope Worldwide (Australia), Mark Timlin recounts, albeit non-critically, that Fijian villagers who lived through the devastation of Cyclone Winston in 2016 credited angelic intervention for their survival (2016). Fiji Methodist Church spokesperson the Rev. James Bhagwan, in clear reproach, laments how Fijians have explained the cyclone as God's retribution for sinful behaviour (2016). Moreover, while John Cox, Glen Finau, Romitesh Kant, Jope Tarai, and Jason Titifanue point out that 'in Fiji, believing that a natural disaster is a divine punishment does not stop Christians from providing assistance to cyclone victims', they add that such a moral economy occludes the guilt of the real culprits: industrial, corporate ac-

tors (2018, 398). In these instances, it seems, Christian belief props up climate change defeatism and denial, or at best, provides for a flawed comprehension of the causes and risks of climate change, affirming secular narratives of religious belief as anti-science.

Christian institutions in Oceania have also been critiqued by academics as hampering climate adaption. Natasha Kuruppu's study in Kiribati points to the onerous financial contributions expected by churches as reducing villagers' ability to afford adaption initiatives (2009). Kuruppu also notes that as church groups are the dominant social forum, discussion on material concerns such as water security are marginalised in favour of more spiritual topics. Another study on adaptive capacity at the Fijian island Druadrua, just off the north coast of Vanua Levu, suggests that denominational tensions between the traditionalist Methodist community and the emergent Christian Mission Fellowship have contributed to a breakdown in their collective ability to respond to climate risks (Dumaru *et al.* 2012). Furthermore, Alexander Gillespie and William Burns make reference to a clergyman in the Cook Islands who declared that climate disasters were a consequence of the adoption of modern lifestyle choices and poor church attendance (Gillespie and Burns 2003).

Indeed, after discussing the manner in which churches have 'injected' themselves into the issue of climate change, particularly regarding trans-Pacific, climate-induced relocation, Kempf argues,

... if Christian actors and institutions throughout the region have chosen to enter the debate on the consequences of climate change and sea-level rise, it is to renew and to consolidate their techniques of shaping and guiding subjects and faith-based constituencies.¹² (Kempf 2012, 237)

We see, therefore, that climate change scholars have typically evaluated the interaction of Christianity and climate change, at both the mythic and institutional level, with suspicion, particularly with regards to how local adaption capacity is undermined by a Christian agenda that prioritises church interests and the symbolic importance of putting faith in God.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND (SECULAR) POWER DISCOURSE

Concurrent with the disquiet regarding Christianity's influence on climate adaption, however, is an admission that present mechanisms for the dissemination of climate change strategies are inadequate, with 'top-down policy' failing

to connect with ‘bottom-up concerns’ (Lane and MacDonald 2005; Mataka, Koshi, and Nair 2007). Furthermore, climate change advocacy is also seen to reproduce and participate in neo-colonial hierarchies. For while climate change is predominantly discussed as a morass of environmental risks, it is also a melee of discourses, wherein different disciplines of knowledge and competing interests jostle for authority – indigenous and foreign, critical and hegemonic, religious and secular.

Barnett and Campbell identify ‘discourses of danger’ in climate change practices that undermine the agency of Pacific Islanders, whereby norms of a booming climate change industry re-inscribe asymmetric power relations between the ‘expert’ – often a foreign, white consultant – and the ‘vulnerable’ villager-subject (Barnett and Campbell 2010, 155). That this dichotomy often aligns to a secular (expert)/religious (villager) binary has, however, received much less attention. The secularity of development expertise, moreover, is not merely an accident of an over-representation of consultants from secular countries. The institutional logic of development expertise appears itself to be secularising. David Mosse discusses how development specialists respond to anxieties of hegemony through self-effacement, bracketing their own ‘personal history, gender, ethnicity, class [religion?]’, and instead commit to the ‘technical universals’ of development practice (Mosse 2011, 17). Yet this retreat into a purely pragmatic approach, shorn of subjectivity, entrenches rather than negates the secularity of their interventions. Self-presenting as a neutral facilitator, the consultant privatises their religious beliefs that might otherwise jeopardise their professional invisibility. Yet this self-imposed taboo leads to a crashing silence on how religious ideals or practices might inhere within the development projects they initiate: endeavours that propose substantive social change in devoutly religious communities.

PACIFIC CHURCHES’ ENGAGEMENT WITH CLIMATE CHANGE

It is from this combined problem of Christian barriers to climate adaptation on the one hand, and the inadequate and hegemonic implementation of climate policy on the other, that the Christian churches of the Pacific, under the umbrella of the Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), have sought greater participation on this issue. The argument goes that if adaptive problems are local and religious, the solutions are not foreign and secular, but also local and religious. The churches present themselves as uniquely authorised to correct scriptural readings that support climate denial (Otin Taai Declaration 2004).¹³ Any misuse of Christian myth for this purpose, therefore, is assumed as the rationale for more church advocacy on climate change, not less. Where de-

nominal disputes undermine adaptive capacity, the PCC can emphasise its ecumenical agenda. Where the dominance of church groups in the public space prevents deliberation on climate change, the PCC can argue that it is easier to Christianise discussions of climate change than it is to secularise village social interaction. And when narratives of ‘God’s will’ generate apathy and resignation, the PCC offers to work, through the structures of Christian faith, to highlight biblical narratives of agency and challenge.¹⁴ The shortcomings of a Christian theo-apaty are not taken as a green light for secular science to claim authority and displace local beliefs. Indeed, as climate change threatens local identity structures, and with Christian myth so integral to local identity, such a move is more likely to result in biblical retrenchment, not a mass conversion to scientific naturalism.¹⁵

Pacific theologians have also recognised the opportunities climate change provides, arguing that it signals the moral and intellectual failure of secular capitalism, and the renewed relevance of the traditional wisdoms of a Christian Pacific. Pacific churchmen and theologians, such as Winston Halapua and Cliff Bird, have developed new contextual theologies offering green, anticolonial and distinctly *Pasifika* Christian responses to climate change (Halapua 2010; Rubow and Bird 2016). Halapua’s *theomoana* draws on a theology of the ocean that resonates with Hau’ofa’s ‘Sea of Islands’ (1994). Bird, along with Cecile Rubow, argues for a return to a culturally Pacific sense of time and place in which one ‘waits,’ in the sense of people living with the fecundity and powers of nature’ (2016, 154). Both reject the hegemonic epistemologies of Western dualism and materialism, which they indict for the world’s ecological crisis.

Articulating climate change advocacy through indigenous epistemologies and with an anticolonial ethos also helps the churches claim a more successful navigation of the problematic hierarchies identified by Barnett and Campbell. This legitimacy-from-autochthony, in turn, has attracted the courtship of well-funded international, secular organisations. For example, the Nansen Initiative, a climate change migration research programme led by the Swiss and Norwegian governments, has partnered up with the Pacific Conference of Churches, stating ‘no other organisation is as close to the people affected, nor as influential or independent in its advocacy role’ (Nansen Initiative 2014, 3). The churches’ enviable communicative reach, from village halls to inter-governmental briefings, is also acknowledged, and is seen by the Nansen Initiative as an ideal infrastructure for translating their expertise to remote, vulnerable sites. The Nansen Initiative describes the churches as ‘ideally positioned to assemble and maintain networks of people, to partner key stakeholders [...] and consult more widely on the technical, scientific and economic expertise’ (ibid). Such an

unrivalled communications resource is viewed as a key asset for supplementing an under-developed nation-state infrastructure.

In light of the above scholarship, a series of somewhat contradictory outcomes start to emerge. Where Christian beliefs clash with the science of climate change, this serves to legitimise a broader advocacy role for the churches and provides new terrain for their pastoral and evangelical activity. Climate change is a carrier of neo-colonial power, supplanting indigenous, traditional knowledge of local ecosystems with outsider, secular knowledge of climate geophysics, yet it also provides the ideal case for anticolonial eco-theologies to decry secular modernity and champion a Christian Pacific. And lastly, as secular agencies exploit church bureaucratic infrastructures to deliver their scientific know-how, the churches become increasingly authorised in the bio-politics of climate change adaption, most potently, village relocation (Kempf 2012).¹⁶

ETHNOGRAPHIES OF VILLAGE RELOCATION FROM CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTION ¹⁷

The ethnographic fieldwork that informs this paper took place in 2015 and draws specifically from the comparative relocation experiences of two Vanua Levu villages, Vunisavisavi and Vunidogoloa, of Cakaudrove Province.¹⁸ Their comparative experiences demonstrate how Christian myth and ritual may (or may not) provide a framework for local epistemologies to take ownership of a village relocation process, and guard against community fragmentation. Looking beyond specific biblical beliefs or church infrastructure, a broader and more meaningful relationship between climate change adaption and Christianity is envisaged.

Village One: Vunisavisavi

Vunisavisavi has a population of just over one hundred people, and sits at the ruins of the former stronghold of the first *Tui Cakau*, the paramount chief of Cakaudrove province. This *dela ni yavu* (formal home-place) dates back to at least the early nineteenth century. Four generations ago, the descendent *Tui Cakau* requested that villagers from the neighbouring island of Taveuni go and occupy the then empty site, and look after the *dela ni yavu* of the high chief. They have remained there ever since, and the community celebrates this duty of cultural stewardship with an annual feast on the beach at these ancient foundations.

The village first noticed the sea-rising approximately fifteen years ago. Their tree crops, including plantain, banana, breadfruit, and coconut died as they were overtaken by the retreating shoreline. Their freshwater streams succumbed to salinisation, and they reported that the fish they catch are smaller and less numerous. Perversely, drought is also a growing problem. Several houses in Vunisavisavi have now been abandoned and their *vanua tabu* – the sacred spaces of the *yavu* of the *Tui Cakau* and the cemetery where their ancestors lay buried – are regularly flooded by the sea. Atypically, Vunisavisavi is a Catholic village, not a Methodist one, with a priest visiting once a month.¹⁹ When the priest visits there is little sermonising on climate change. Nevertheless, the village affirmed that it frequently prays for delivery from this crisis, using a generic Catholic prayer for natural disasters.

In early 2016, US-Aid delivered to Vunisavisavi their Climate Change – Community Adaption Project, building four houses at a new in-land site, and cyclone-proofing seven others. This provided timely shelter against the onslaught of Cyclone Winston and the village was quick to point out that this ‘blessing’ had arrived during the Catholic Church’s Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy (Naidu 2017). Yet despite the assistance from US-Aid, Vunisavisavi’s relocation remains problematic. For both financial and cultural reasons, many villagers remain trapped at the old site. Funds for building new houses at the relocation site are scarce as village income is limited to the selling of kava cultivated on land rented from a neighbouring village. Furthermore, the government only *partners* relocation initiatives, and will not foot the bill on their own. Despite the efforts of US-Aid, around a dozen households remain located at the old site and further money for relocation is not guaranteed.

Of equal importance is that many villagers feel honour-bound to stay and care for the *dela ni yavu* of the old *Tui Cakau*. The present *Tui Cakau*, Ratu Naqaima Lababalavu, has told them of his intent to rebuild his *bure* (house) on the old foundations, believing in the *mana* of the land. A villager reported that the paramount chief said that the whole province would be diminished if they abandoned the sacred site (Tikoisuva 2017). As a consequence of all these factors, relocation often occurs as drift, with individual households moving discreetly, one or two at a time. Those who are most immediately threatened by the sea are the first to move. For many, this is regarded as a threat to village solidarity. A village elder stated, ‘Now the bonds are starting to loosen up, because some are moving, and some will have to stay here.’ Thus the exigencies of money and tradition have led to relocation being a divisive process, and a difficult topic of conversation in the village. It is worth noting that as the new site is assembling to the order by which households relocate, the lay-out of the

new village memorialises the relocation process itself. New neighbours are positioned adjacent to each other not in accordance with where they lived in the old village, but alongside those similarly vulnerable to sea-level rise, and who abandoned the old village at the same time.²⁰ This can break-up extended family units (*tokatoka*) and undermine the cultural practice of sharing resources amongst groups larger than the nuclear family.

Village Two: Vunidogoloa

The predominantly Methodist village of Vunidogoloa, by comparison, fully completed its relocation on 16 January 2014.²¹ Suffering similar hardship to Unisavisavi, it became the first village to relocate because of sea-level rise in Fiji. Vunidogoloa relocated to a pre-fabricated village one mile inland, which was financed through a combination of \$FJ1,000,000 from the government, and the villagers contributing approximately \$FJ250,000 worth of timber.²² The village moved *en masse* over a period of three days. The villagers recalled the day as heavy with sadness, but also full with ritual. As spokesperson Saliosi Ramutu confirmed,

Before we moved up to this new site, we invited ... the *roko tui* [regional state official] ... and we had the *talatala* [Methodist minister] ... come and do the protocol ... and had a feast to the ancestors at the old site And those same protocols when we arrived here.

For the villagers, the protocols were not without an immediate benefit. Saliosi explained,

those who are dead can have a say on our movement So on the first day of relocation the truck could not make it up the hill ... [but] we had a saying with the Fijian protocol system and they [the ancestors] let us come up the hill again.

Vunidogoloa could not move their old cemetery and had to leave their buried ancestors at the old village. However, the anguish of moving away from this sacred site was soothed through the intercession of the local *talatala*, who could explain to the ancestors why the village had to move. Moreover, should later reflection question the relocation's legitimacy, the story of the truck getting stuck and then moving again after the ancestors were ritually approached, provides evidence that the ancestors sanctioned the move. When asked about moving *en masse* versus moving individually, the village affirmed the importance of moving together. Teresia Powell of the Cakaudrove Provincial

Office, who was present during the *talanoa* session, explained, ‘there is a term that we use, *solesolevaka*, the whole community plan together, work as a household ... so that is where they are coming from, its communal, they have to move together’. The villagers also planned the lay-out of their new village to mirror the distribution of households in the old village. Whereas now the houses are standardised, and young families have their own individual house, to a large extent new neighbours are the same neighbours of old. The layout of the new village memorialises the old village.

Vunidogoloa’s elders also stated that the relocation had strengthened relationships within the community and with God, with the entire process presented as analogous to the Christian myth of Exodus.

We named this village Canaan, Kenani The relocation process and climate change impact, and the process of moving up here was like the story of moving out of Egypt ... to The Promised Land.

Every 16 January it will be Vunidogoloa Day ... during this day we will read the book, like the movement of the Israelites to [sic] Egypt. We will read the story about the movement ... Tell the stories so that the young people coming up now know what God did. What was God’s intervention. The miracle that He did, moving us here

It’s like the Israelites when they moved to [sic] Egypt, they have a special day which they recorded in the Bible. The ancestors used to read to the children. This was the time of God We had this great intervention with us!

The Exodus myth is narrated not only as an illuminating parallel to their own relocation, but as a repetition: a lived experience of God actively intervening to deliver the villagers from their plight. The biblical renaming of the village, merging local and Old Testament geographies, is not an unprecedented move in Fiji. During Fiji’s indigenous, anticolonial *Tuka* Movement in the late nineteenth century, villages in Ra Province were renamed with the ancient places of the Hebrew Bible (Nicole 2011). The practice of *yaca* (namesakes) between Fijians, where new-born children inherit the names of ancestors is not intended as merely honorific, as it is also believed to impart the eponym’s character onto the namesake (Jones 2015). This suggests that the naming of ‘Kenani’ extends beyond simply the metaphorical. In addition to the villagers repeating the migratory plot of Exodus, the traditional commemoration of the Exodus myth is replicated too. Vunidogoloa’s annual Passover-style celebra-

tion includes a feast, and the three *tokatoka* compete to choreograph the best *meke*s (traditional dances) that re-tell the relocation story. Furthermore, when children are read the story written in ‘the book’ detailing the time the village relocated, it is heard as a Bible story, and it is a story that the village articulates, remembers and passes on collectively. There is an ethic to Vunidogoloa’s story too. The villagers explained that a clan in the village is gifted with the ability to heal bone fractures, claiming that ‘it is a gift we have been given by God’. The villagers report that people travel from overseas to be healed, and yet the villagers say that they have never asked for payment. As reward for the village’s altruism God moved the village so that the village was now closer to the road, and consequently also to the school and hospital.

COMPARING VILLAGE RELOCATIONS

Several marked contrasts are evident in the relocation experiences of these two villages. Whereas relocation in Vunisavisavi has invited community division, relocation in Vunidogola has strengthened community ties. In Vunisavisavi, relocation is hermeneutically problematic. Relocation cannot be discussed in a way that neither threatens village unity nor their stewardship of the *Tui Cakau’s dela ni yavu*. As such, relocation is not mentioned lightly in conversation. Whereas in Vunidogoloa, the relocation narrative is rich in a Christian symbolism that validates the community. In Vunisavisavi, a specifically Christian engagement with climate change is limited to prayers for divine intervention. In Vunidogoloa, not only did the *talatala* and *roko tui* administer protocols that ritually sanctified the move, Christian faith completely refashioned the relocation experience into an immersive Bible story, wholly owned and participated in by the villagers. In Vunisavisavi, the memory of forced relocation is silent but ever-present, fixed in wood and stone, and externally imposed by the layout of the village. By contrast, in Vunidogoloa, the traumatic memory of relocation is temporally contained within the annual Vunidogoloa Day, and is creatively explored in a new liturgy of *meke*s and story-telling.

These differences, however, are not wholly resultant from internal factors, for Vunidogoloa also received assistance from the PCC, whereas Vunisavisavi did not. The PCC works through a denominational church apparatus, and as such does not visit a village unless invited by the local church. Vunisavisavi’s lack of a resident Catholic priest could therefore have contributed to the PCC’s non-involvement. And while, according to an interview with PCC official Peter Emberson, Roman Catholics are more responsive to a climate savvy, in-the-world eco-theology than the newer Pentecostal churches which prioritise

discipleship and personal salvation, Vunisavisavi lacked a ministry that would steer their faith in such a direction.²³ As such, the passive reception of God's will remained the dominant Christian narrative for climate change. With Methodist Vunidogoloa, however, the fingerprints of PCC's advocacy are visible in both their Exodus narrative of relocation and their liturgical innovation. In an interview conducted before the Vunidogoloa fieldwork, Emberson explained that PCC's advocacy not only produced and distributed new hymns, prayers and sermons relevant to the threat of climate change, but also sought to impart an energy and inspiration from the migrations of the Old Testament, labelling its scriptural geography as a 'cross-roads of ancient diasporic flows'. That the PCC's advocacy also places strong emphasis on good village governance – extolled in terms of not repeating 'the rule of the Pharaoh' – makes the appeal of an Exodus framing increasingly clear. Interestingly, Emberson identified Fijian Methodism as closer to the Pentecostal denominations in terms of their poor reception of climate risks. Discourses of the End Times, sin and retribution, and divine will were listed as entrenched beliefs amongst village Methodists and required careful navigation in climate advocacy. The PCC pursued this cautious approach through the use of 'challenge parables'.²⁴ These not only took a non-confrontational approach to perception change, but also demanded a more profound and reflective personal engagement with biblical myths.

A successful relocation entails not only the provision of essential amenities for relocated peoples. It also requires that relocation procedures foster the conditions in which local epistemologies can take ownership of the relocation experience. Otherwise, the harmful, socio-psychological impacts of climate change relocation may persist long after the physical hazards are nullified. In the two case studies, it is the process of moving *en masse* as a community that best provides the underlying circumstances in which villagers can mythologise and ritualise their relocation experiences. Whereas the advocacy of the PCC is clearly influential, it is difficult to see how a similar activation of Christian ritual and mythic resources could have been deployed if their relocation took place individually, a few households at a time. In moving together, Vunidogoloa's experience of relocation could be refashioned as living Exodus, as opposed to suffering exile. Vunidogoloa demonstrates the importance of these Christian resources for shoring-up community integrity when facing an existential threat, and when applied, how climate change risk can be subsumed into an empowering, localised narrative. However, the case studies also demonstrate that this option to move as a community is greatly affected by access to economic resources, as well as the ability to relocate cultural capital. Vunidogoloa's gift of healing moved with the villagers, Vunisavisavi's *dela ni yavu* of the *Tui Cakau* cannot.

CONCLUSION

If the Pacific has experienced three waves of invasive globalisation, symbolised respectively by the cross, the crown, and the Coke can, climate change is the fourth wave. As local knowledge of where and when to plant and fish is undermined by shifts in the physical climate, the outsider scientist appears, and with arcane knowledge of environmental geo-systems, instructs villagers how best to respond to their impending demise.²⁵ This hierarchy between the secular scientist and religious villager is reflected in the academic discourses that seek to research the relationship between climate change and Christianity in the Pacific. Pacific Christianity is evaluated as a 'resource' for adapting to the hazards of climate change. In the ethnographic studies mentioned earlier, scriptural beliefs are deemed problematic to this end. Where secular aid agencies do find value in Christian institutions, it is not in their spiritual wisdom. It is the churches' moral authority amongst the religious masses and their extensive communicative networks that excite their interest.

In the two Fijian case-studies, however, viewing Christian belief and practice as a means or hindrance to adaptive capacity misses how deeply 'religion' integrates within village life. It is misguided to think that the PCC could improve Vunisavisavi's predicament simply by evincing a heroic Exodus reading to their struggle. The villagers' passive prayers for mercy are symptomatic rather than causal of their claustrophobic situation. With Vunidogoloa, the consulting with the ancestors to restart the truck, the moving together (*solesolevaka*), the Exodus self-narration, the meritorious bone-healing and the annual feasts and *meke* on Vunidogoloa Day, demonstrate not so much a cogently applied, problem-solving technique to village relocation, but the cultural encompassment of an alienating experience, which subsequently became absorbed, rewritten and reclaimed. Perhaps the next step, then, is not to find new ways of calibrating Christianity to better serve secular climate change adaption projects, but to first ask how adaptive processes may best translate and cohere *within* the holistic and embedded religious-cultural systems of rural Fijians.

As discussed earlier, community harm can result when Christian identity and beliefs collide with the existential threat of climate change. This does not merely undermine adaption capacity, but also provokes stubborn retrenchment into a restrictive biblical literalism. Both Rudiak-Gould and Kempf situate their cases of biblical climate denialism as anticolonial: the articulation of a locally-owned mythic resource that seeks to repudiate the message that anthropogenic global warming, caused by foreign industry and over-consumption, will force islanders to abandon their drowning homelands (Kempf 2014, Rudiak-Gould 2013). This

defensive exegesis is as much contextually determined by the inherently neo-colonial coding of climate threats as it is the result of Pacific biblicism. When, however, climate change is thoroughly re-scripted by churches, it facilitates new possibilities for villager agency, such as with the use of challenge parables or mapping village relocation onto familiar biblical mythic landmarks. So coded, climate change opens-up new theatres for the performance of biblical myths and the affirmation of community identity, and draws Christian belief and practice into a local ownership. It *also* produces a more pro-active response to climate risks. Such a lead role for the churches admittedly establishes their own governmentality in regional politics, displacing one form of institutional power with another. Furthermore, such a new politics for climate change will pressure local denominational or doctrinal differences, which may fracture and create fresh social division. Such a risk may still be preferable, however, to a leading role by non-Pacific actors motivated by interests located elsewhere. Indeed, it may only be through such an alternative approach that we avoid climate change becoming another wave of subaltern dispossession – of land, meaning, and agency.

NOTES

- 1 Thomas A. J. White is a PhD candidate in the Religion Programme at the University of Otago. His research explores issues of public religion in the South Pacific, with a specialisation on religion, law, and politics in Fiji. Before Otago, Thomas worked for four years as a lecturer at the Fiji National University, coordinating the University's undergraduate Ethics and Governance course. He has master's degrees from Durham University in Religion and Society (2011), and Edinburgh University in Philosophy and Politics (2006).
Email: mr_tom_white@live.co.uk
- 2 For example, in the breakdown of its aid budget, Australia's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade identifies climate change in the Pacific as an 'investment priority' and has allocated \$300 million to tackle climate change in Pacific countries for the period 2016–2020 (DFAT, 2018).
- 3 The Fijian government has identified 676 villages at serious risk from sea-level rise, and ministers have repeatedly linked this threat directly with anthropogenic global warming (Devi 2014; Rawalai 2014).
- 4 First-order initiatives include risk mapping, improving village drainage, water-proofing food and fresh-water resources, and strengthening coastal protection systems, such as fortifying sea-walls and planting mangroves along the shore.

- 5 This was a common village response found during fieldwork, which was solely investigating at-risk coastal villages. These villages were inhabited by ethnically indigenous Fijians, who overwhelmingly report as Christian. It is worth pointing out, however, that Fiji is a religiously diverse nation. According to the 2017 Census, out of a population of 884,887, a total 612,415 reported as Christian, 212,346 as Hindu, 50,925 as Muslim, 1,837 as Sikh, 2924 as Other Religion, and 4,440 as No Religion or Not stated.
- 6 Villagers tend to prefer on-site adaption over relocation for a variety of reasons (cf. Barnet and Campbell 2010; Mimura 1999; Radio New Zealand 2016). Many of these are discussed in the paper. The recalcitrance to undertake village relocation is further underlined by the fact this adaption strategy receives no mention in the Fijian Government's 2012 Climate Change Policy document (Secretariat of the South Pacific 2012).
- 7 Unlike atoll island states such as the Marshall Islands, Kiribati and Tuvalu, which are entirely low-lying, much of Fiji's relief can typically offer villagers the nearby sanctuary of higher ground. There are exceptions to this, such as the village of Daku, Tailevu, where clan (*mataqali*) land-ownership does not include any higher ground. If this village relocates, therefore, they will need to take whatever land is made available. This land is likely to be much further afield from their original village site.
- 8 The following quote from Cagilaba, drawing on experiences in Kadavu, Fiji, explains the importance of house inheritance practices: 'a traditional Fijian house or bure is always built on a *yavu*, which is the foundation of a house... The task of allocating where a certain *yavu* will be laid involves the chief throwing stones from his own house [usually located in the village centre]. Where those stones land is where each person will build their house and lay their *yavu*. These *yavu* remain in that family always for them and their offspring's use. Before the house is constructed and before the laying down of the *yavu*, it is the tradition that a *magiti* or feast is prepared in honour of the foundation laying. These *yavu* become almost sacred over time, having become imbued with Fijian metaphysical qualities and there are usually repercussions for those who choose to build on a *yavu* that is not of their family. Over time these *yavu* come to hold *mana*' (Cagilaba 2005, 76).
- 9 Peter France introduces indigenous land ownership rights in Fiji from a historical perspective (France 1969). John Crosetto offers a more contemporary analysis (Crosetto 2005).

- 10 The location of climate change firmly within church mission is apparent in the official statements released by Pacific church leaders, particularly the Otin Taai Declaration in 2004 and the Moana Declaration of 2009.
- 11 It is important to point out here both Kempf and Rudiak-Gould are more sophisticated in their treatment of such beliefs than this quick review suggests. Their situating of biblical beliefs in broader ideological discourses of neo-colonialism and anti-modernity, however, is mentioned briefly towards the end of the paper.
- 12 Kempf's analysis is particularly interesting in the case of Fiji. Functional boundaries between religion and the state have hardened under Prime Minister Bainimarama, particularly since the promulgation of the 2013 Constitution which declared Fiji a 'secular state'. Yet, to date at least, climate change proceeds as a field of productive and agreeable, mutual endeavour. While church engagement in 'politics' is publicly condemned by the government, climate change provides new terrain where the churches can claim authority.
- 13 Richard Davis' approach to the Noahic Covenant is a good example of this (Davis 2015).
- 14 Interview with Peter Emberson, Pacific Conference of Churches, 14 April 2014, Suva, Fiji.
- 15 Kempf makes exactly this point regarding church efforts to recalibrate the Noah myth. (Kempf 2014)
- 16 Examples of this is the inclusion of church officials advocating on climate change in Fiji's national climate change COP summit negotiating team, and the major land purchase in Vanua Levu, Fiji, from the Anglican church by Kiribati, in anticipation of i-Kiribati immigration from sea-level rise displacement. See Office of the President of Kiribati, 'Kiribati buys a piece of Fiji', 30 May 2014, Accessed 11 March from <http://www.climate.gov.ki/2014/05/30/kiribati-buys-a-piece-of-fiji/>
- 17 This fieldwork was undertaken as part of a broader project, Fijian Narratives for Climate Change, and was funded by the University of the South Pacific and Fiji National University. The project members consisted of Sudesh Mishra, Matthew Hayward, Maebh Long, Sekove Degei, Elike Drugunalevu, and the author. The research team visited a total of four villages in early 2015 (two in Viti Levu in January–February, two in Vanua Levu in May), of which the two Vanua Levu villages developed as the object of this study. The author is not personally affiliated with either of the villages, which were approached through Fiji's provincial

administration. The author does not affiliate with any church, nor to any faith. Another article from this project is Maebh Long's 'Vanua in the Anthropocene: Relationality and Sea Level Rise in Fiji' (Long 2018).

- 18 The focus group sessions were mix-gendered, comprised of approximately twenty to thirty villagers, with seven or eight elders, men and women, contributing most to the discussion. Adopting a culturally prominent method of questioning, called *talanoa* (Halapua 2000), the conversation was only loosely structured, and evenly participated between interviewers and respondents. The Vunidogoloa *talanoa* took place on 24 May 2015, and the Vunisavisavi *talanoa* took place on 25 May 2015. Full, single-day visits to either village sought to balance methodological rigour with the burden such visits place on these villages. Vunidogoloa, in particular, is bombarded with international researchers, who cause considerable disruption to village life. The focus groups were followed by a guided tour around each village. Group interviews were facilitated by a translator, who would translate any questions in English into the local Fijian dialect, and when villagers chose to speak Fijian, translate responses back into English. All sessions were recorded and then checked for accuracy back in Suva. Informal interviews with church officials, Pacific theologians, climate scientists, and provincial government officers also provided useful sources of information. The author, having had the good fortune to work as a lecturer at the Fiji National University in Nasinu, from 2012–2015, also discussed this topic with students in tutorials. Official documents such as church statements, government press releases, and NGO, government, and inter-government technical reports have also informed this research.
- 19 According to the 2007 Fiji Bureau of Statistics Census, Methodism is the largest Christian denomination in Fiji, accounting for thirty-five per cent of Fiji's population. However, as a portion of Fiji's *Taukei*, ethnically indigenous population, this figure increases to sixty-one per cent. Catholicism accounts for only sixteen per cent of *Taukei* religious adherence, and nine per cent of the total population.
- 20 A female village elder confirmed 'So it's not as your neighbour now. It's more those who are vulnerable first, they will be neighbours, not as they are now'.
- 21 McNamara and Des Combes have also written a report on the relocation of the village. While they mention the involvement of the PCC, it is simply treated as another project consultant. The religious aspects of the move are not discussed (McNamara and Des Combes 2010).
- 22 Different figures have been quoted for government contributions. For instance, Julia Edwards of the Pacific Conference of Churches states the sum of FJ\$500,000,

'Relocation Revisited: Vunidogoloa village, Vanua Levu, Fiji', November 2014, accessed 11 March from http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/1395086/relocation-revisited_-vunidogoloa-village-fiji-nov14-je.pdf. In interviews, however, this figure was stated as closer to FJ\$1,000,000. This higher figure is confirmed in a release by the Secretariat of the South Pacific. See 'Upheaval of Fiji communities as climate change impacts felt', 5 December 2015, accessed 11 March 2017 from <https://www.sprep.org/climate-change/upheaval-of-fiji-communities-as-climate-change-impacts-are-felt>

- 23 Interview with Peter Emberson, Pacific Conference of Churches, 14 April 2014, Suva, Fiji.
- 24 Irish theologian John Dominic Crossan explains challenge parables with reference to the story of the Good Samaritan. The hero of this tale, despised by society as a foreigner, offers help where no other 'good' local would. If this were simply an 'example parable', the Good Samaritan could be anyone and the simple message regarding the virtue of helping others would require little reflection prior to full comprehension. Yet through the cognitive dissonance of having a Samaritan protagonist, the challenge parable requires reflection into internal prejudices regarding lazy character judgments of outsiders. Crossan offers that this form of engagement 'is perfect for a paradigm-shift message. Because a collaborative eschaton requires a participatory pedagogy' (Crossan 2012, 111, 134).
- 25 It is candidly admitted that climate scientists are alert to this problem. For example, at the University of the South Pacific it was often said that 'a *waka* (Fijian canoe) sails with two hulls', seeking to affirm that scientific knowledge must be complemented by cultural knowledge if it is to effectively respond to climate change threats. In particular, this was re-iterated at the European Consortium for Pacific Studies (ECOPAS) Conference 'Returning the Human to Climate Change', December 2013, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji.

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