

Wild and Domesticated: Matailobau Foods, Gender, and Rituals

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Abstract

This paper considers gender concepts in Matailobau Fijians' everyday speech and the possible transformation of such ideas in three rituals focusing on food, gender, and reproduction. Two of these rituals concentrate on women and one focuses on men. The pre-Christian ruku ritual, known only through textual accounts, suggesting that women had to be 'warmed' for the reproduction process, has themes and utilizes foods that recur in the other two rituals. Whereas the contemporary bisaba ritual pertains to women, their maternity and child-rearing activities, the annual first fruits ceremony centres on men and their securing prosperity from ancestral forces.

Introduction

Christina Toren, writing about Gau villagers of central Fiji, maintains that '[r]itual practice is fundamental to people's constitution over time of ideas that, in this case, inform a specifically Fijian Christianity' and that 'the process of making meaning is such that the continuity and transformation of ideas are aspects of one another' (2003: 109-10). I consider in this paper a similar phenomenon in the transformation of gender concepts in everyday speech, a textual account of a pre-Christian ritual and a contemporary ritual focusing on women's reproductive roles and the first fruits ceremony devoted to men's endeavours held in an eastern highland village of Viti Levu, Fiji.

I spent seventeen months between 1979 and 1981 in a Matailobau village, Nairukuruku, in Naitasiri Province.¹ From the day I entered the

¹ The research was sponsored by the National Science Foundation of the United

village when the ritual *sevusevu* (to request a chief's protection while living in his village) was presented on my behalf, to the day I was farewelled with a feast, *magiti*, replete with speeches and gifted mats, I was aware of the number and kinds of ritual occurring there. In the intervening years, two rituals' respective significances have intrigued me because of the 'anthropological turn to studying language and performance as particularly creative domains of social action' (Tomlinson, 2004: 6): the *ruku* of pre-Christian times whose purpose appears to have been assuring nature's and humans' fertility by emphasizing women's participation in the latter, and the *bisaba* celebrated for newly delivered women and their infants, persons recovering from serious illness, and persons taking up village residency. I will describe and analyze these rituals for two reasons: First, I perceive connections between these rituals owing to conceptions of gender in this part of Fiji exemplifying Toren's concept of 'continuity and transformation of ideas.' Second, gendered connotations of food, cultivation, and social and human reproduction are embedded in these rituals thus elaborating these rituals' meanings and Matalobau people's statements about women and men. In conclusion, I discuss these rituals' contents with that of the first fruits ceremony because the *ruku*'s and the *bisaba*'s foci are on women and statements about their reproductive activities, whereas men are the central figures in the first fruits ceremony that is a ritual of increase whose objective is to 'seek to promote the health and prosperity of the community' (Turner, 1984: 133).

The *Ruku* Ritual

In pre-Christian times, women in this region appeared to have had considerable control over their sexual reproduction. For instance, when a woman delivered a child, she and her attendants did not allow a man inside the confinement house; this was disconcerting for men because they had 'the most profound distrust' of women's behaviour:

They credit them with always endeavouring to evade maternity, and fear that the midwives may, under the pretence of the necessity of a surgical operation, unduly use the bamboo (their principal cutting instrument), and so damage the offspring. A man never knows but that at some time or other he may have seriously offended his wife or her relations, and this is the way, he conceives, in which they could best revenge themselves. To guard against anything like this, as far as pos-

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sible, a man is placed outside the house where the confinement is going on. He squats under the eaves and listens untiringly to all that it [sic] going on inside, and he is expected to take a full and accurate account of all that he hears to his anxious principals at the *Mbure* [communal hall]. We may look at this waiting outside as a compromise. The women suffer that... (Brewster, 1922: 169).

Thus, one may speculate given this cultural milieu that an ancient ritual, the *ruku*, was an admission that Highland women could resist maternity.

Ruku can have several meanings, for example, 'under,' as in the expression *ruku mai*, come underneath [the lintel of the doorway] and inside the house, which is said to those about to enter a house, but in terms of this ritual *ruku* appears to have signified the candle-nut and be a feminine symbol. This latter set of associations is remarkable metaphorically: A.B. Brewster, the Governor's Commissioner for the Provinces of Colo North and Colo East from 1884 to 1910,² wrote that people of the northern highlands 'used to celebrate a great mystic annual yam festival called the *Ruku*, a word synonymous with *yon*i, the [feminine] Hindu symbol of the fertility of nature... These annual yam festivals were universal throughout old Fiji' (1922: 93). During the *ruku*, people were prohibited from visiting both yam and taro gardens. 'It was the time of the gods who were called the *Sevunganga*, the Mighty First Fruits. It was the division, too, of the seasons, after which the people might go to their gardens, and greatly indeed would the crops then flourish because of the prayers and supplications which had been made' (Brewster, *ibid.*).

The *ruku* occurred around September when warm weather began. During the first two days of this ten day celebration there was a 'heating up' of the participants. Logs were burnt in the communal halls and people had to lie on their mats until noon. Bathing was prohibited during these two days (a similar prohibition on full body bathing existed for newly married couples in Matailobau villages during my fieldwork). The firing of these logs, the propitiation of the ancestral gods, and the name *ruku*, associated with the candle-nut used as a source of fire as light and heat, probably resulted from Fijians' linking of heat and fecundity that were 'mixed up mysteriously together' (Brewster, 1922: 95). The people's and nature's fecundity were somehow contingent on these entities having to be 'heated' in order to regenerate. Women's fertility may have particularly been related to the creation of or requirement for heat given the control they had over their maternity.

² A. B. Brewster was formerly known as Adolph Brewster Joske.

As the candle-nut is connected to women, so too is the spear grass linked to men and an appropriate symbol in the *ruku* ritual. The spear grass was the stake for yam shoots to climb. Candle-nuts were stuck on spear grass and functioned as candles or torches; even modern light sources bear the name of *sina* or *cina*. During the *ruku*, the spear-grass shafts were topped with hard wood heads called *ulu toa*, chicken heads, and thrown in matches between villages. 'Some of these *ulu toa* [were] said to be men and some women. In the former there are sockets which fit into the *sina* stems, and in the latter grooves, into which the spear is inserted, and the two together may be symbolical of the union of the sexes' (Brewster, 1922: 92).

From the use of gender symbols indexed to crops in this ritual, I think it is clear that these ancient Fijians wished for the fruitfulness of humans and plants. Women might have thwarted these ritual efforts, and men's hope of controlling women may be reflected in another part of this ritual: Presentations of a variety of wild yam during the ritual *tikau*, were bundled in turmeric leaves and then tied with vines from another kind of wild yam. These yam bundles rested on top of taro stalks, female symbols, which in turn were laid upon fragrant leaves. The position of 'male' yams on 'female' taro on top of leaves perhaps was a representation of a conjugal couple on nuptial mats.³ The placement of the feminine taro beneath the masculine yams corresponds to another meaning of the word *ruku*, for instance, the space beneath, where the taro occupies the space beneath the yams and the plants that may be 'the bed'. This association of women with spaces, as in their identification with the hollow bamboo water container, corresponds with other cultural descriptions of women. I will return to this later.

A continuity and transformation of ideas about gender, food, and specifically women's wilfulness regarding their reproductive rights from pre-Christian, indigenous times, as expressed in the *ruku*, occur in the *bisaba* ritual. *Bisaba*'s frequent celebration is, I maintain, a result of historical events that directly undercut human and cultural reproduction. The salient ideas that continue across time are that recalcitrant women are to blame for population loss resulting from European colonization of Fiji.

³ In the Roikero language, the name of an annual festival, *Nang-a*, meant a heap of mats that is a bed. The *Nang-a* was symbolical of the mystic bed of the tribe from which these people supposedly arose. *Nang-a* had two cults, *Visina*, which means spears, and *Rukuruku*, which means little candle-nut. The *Rukuruku* cult had rites that in Brewster's opinion were 'altogether more terrible than those of *Visina*' (Brewster, 1922: 95).

The *Bisaba* Ritual and the Colonial Experience

British colonization of Fiji occurred because of a confluence of factors: Fijians and Tongans were competing for suzerainty of the Fijian archipelago; European settlers needed security to succeed commercially; and Britain had geopolitical concerns about its presence in the Pacific. When Fijians plundered the American Consul in 1849 during a fire in the Consul's house, the United States of America wanted restitution from the alleged 'King of Fiji', Cakobau. In 1858, Cakobau requested British help to raise US\$45,000 as compensation to the Americans. Cakobau wanted to present Queen Victoria with 200,000 acres of land to reciprocate her government's assistance in settling Fiji's debt to the American government. Such a presentation was tantamount to an offer of Cession of Fiji to Britain; one that Cakobau had no hereditary right to make. Yet the British consul resident in Fiji called a meeting of all the major chiefs in order to produce some semblance of authority to release the land to the British Crown.

Cakobau's action did not obtain hegemony over all Fijians because chiefs of the interior of Viti Levu, the Hill Tribes, did not attend the meeting. Matalobau may have been part of the Hill Tribes who fought British colonial forces and other Fijian soldiers for their continued autonomy while the Deed of Cession was being signed to the British Crown on 10 October 1874. Arthur Gordon, the first governor of Fiji, wrote: 'All the Ra [the highlands] [as consisting] of a number of petty republics. The chiefs have no power except for evil, and the people declare that they, the people are rulers and not the chiefs, who are only appointed to carry out the public will' (Gordon, 1879: 66, as cited in Kaplan, 1989: 358).

The British found it difficult to impose their rule on the Hill Tribes who were the last to leave their cannibal past and religious practices. Hill Tribe people seemed to have suffered more severely from the signing of the Deed of Cession than Fijians who had earlier contacts with Europeans. The Governor of New South Wales had invited Cakobau and his party to visit Sydney after the signing ceremony. A member of this entourage 'immediately developed measles which spread like fire through the group' upon his return to Fiji (Brewster, 1922: 68). Measles killed about a third of the population of the Hill Tribes and stirred the survivors of the Western Tribes to engage in the last major fight against Europeans and other Fijians. The Hill Tribe priests claimed that this new affliction was the ancestral gods' curse because people were converting to Christianity.

The population's demise continued, and in 1905 there were about 87,000 Fijians, that is, a loss of approximately 113,000 persons over

thirty years (*Colonial Reports Fiji*, 1955:8). The population remained stable until 1919 when it plunged to its lowest recorded level of 83,000 owing to the influenza pandemic. Alongside this decimation from disease was the rise in infant mortality starting in the middle 1880s, which, according to the colonial administrator Joske who had been assigned to the Hill Tribes from 1884 to 1910, was 'due largely to defective nutrition' (Brewster, 1922: 154). The Governor of Fiji, Sir George O'Brien, ordered Fijians to buy cows and 'that the women should be instructed in the use of feeding-bottles...they revolted' (ibid.). Some Fijian men doubted whether their children should drink cows' milk to boost their nutritional status.

Some of you say, "The children of the whites live because they get cows' milk, our children die because we have not cows' milk to give them." How many Fijians are present here that were brought up on cows' milk? Yet ye are strong men and so were your fathers, and they were brought up on the produce of the land. The truth is that you, chiefs, were reared by women that were well fed, that were kept comfortable, and had nothing to do except to care for you. But the only food employed was that of the land, the same as had been used by your fathers from time immemorial...But if a mother has rest, a dry comfortable house, and an abundance of good food, the produce of the land, she can nourish her child herself until it is able to eat (Notes of the Proceedings of a Native Council, 1885: 7).

'[R]eared by women that were well fed, that were kept comfortable, and had nothing to do except to care for you' refers to changes in Fijian cultures and society brought on by colonialism, and which, I propose, relate to the *bisaba* ritual.

While some Fijian men sided with colonial officials' directives to buy cows and give cow's milk to Fijian infants and other Fijian men disagreed with this policy, it seems that women universally rejected using bottles. Women's refusal to bottle-feed their children illustrates women's streak of independence, which men feared might in some circumstances turn them from socially responsible behavior. An excerpt from a Council of Chiefs meeting held in 1882 indicates that men suspected another explanation for the increase in infant mortality.

A mother, now that she no longer fears the old consequences of neglect, cares little for her child. She neither feeds it, oils it, nor does anything for it, as was done in the days of old...We some time ago permitted some of the young [coconuts] to be used for children, the immediate results has been that the mothers have taken to drinking

nuts. It is almost impossible to lay down any hard and fast rules, people [i.e., women] won't adhere to it (Notes of the Proceedings of a Council of Chiefs, 1882: 24, 54-55).

Not only were Fijian women blamed by some men for the high rate of infant mortality, they were supposedly guilty of 'evasions of maternity', which was assumed to be an explanation for the low Fijian birth rate (Notes of the Proceedings of a Native Council, 1885).

Colonialism and Christianity ended the post-partum taboo, established monogamy, encouraged marital ties over those of descent, and created nuclear family households that could have resulted in Matailobau women conceiving more often and having fewer opportunities to share work and child rearing. Considering their previous behaviour and culturally assigned traits, Matailobau women could be suspected of wanting to control their fertility and workload under these new circumstances. Indeed, women in other societies have done so, although the economic and cultural situations differed considerably, for example, slave owners in Barbados had the problem of 'maintaining an adequate supply of labour by natural reproduction' (Beckles, 189: 90).

Government reports of the time indicate that Fijian women lost the communal spirit of childcare that they had. One regulation that must have had an effect on female behaviour was recorded in the minutes of the meeting held at Naibita, Nailego, on 26 and 27 April 1899, stating that pregnant women should not fish, women who were not pregnant should not fish at night, and no women should be allowed to smoke. Sanctions for women fishing at night were in the punitive clauses of the Native Regulations, *Talaidredre* (Jolly, 1998: 194).

Fishing provides protein in the local diet. Fishing can be done with other women and for other women. But if the new colonial administration demanded more gardening – and this meant more work for Matailobau women who, unlike some Fijian women, cultivate alongside men – as a means of taxation, and gardening could only be done during the daylight, fishing would have to occur more at night. The government regulation on fishing could have decreased women's access to a protein source, an opportunity to assist others, and a source of sociability and bonding.

The preceding statements from official archives depict Fijian women as thwarting British and Fijian men's efforts to maintain Fijian society. Tacit in these reports are cultural definitions of unpredictable and wilful women and prudent and responsible men – qualities that may have predated the colonial experience. As these feminine qualities appear to extend across time, so too does the experience of British colonialism span

generations.

People – primarily women because I spent most of my time with them being a married woman with an infant – talked about the colonial period, for example, remarking that one had to obtain permission from a government official to leave the village and travel to the capital, Suva. Women mentioned that pacification undermined Matailobau men's self-esteem, which in turn prompted men's almost daily consumption of the mildly soporific beverage *yaqona* (kava), as one means to assuage their personal and collective losses. According to these women, men's *yaqona* drinking lowered men's horticultural productivity. Women cultivated more as a result.

As noted earlier, under the aegis of Christianity, women came under their husbands' authority more than in the past and had to fulfil conjugal relations as sole spouses and without the intervention of the postpartum taboo. Some Matailobau women claimed that they had more children and at more frequent intervals than in the past when they did not have intercourse with their husbands until all of a child's deciduous teeth were erupted; some said they could breastfeed a child until it was five years old and thus not have sex with their husbands until the child was completely weaned. Women never spontaneously discussed with me the high infant mortality and low birth rates reported in government and other sources after colonization. Nor did women address the issue that until the 1950s, they were blamed for Fijian mortality and birth rates. Only once did the oldest woman in the village (then about eighty years old) reminisce on what she had heard about the problems that Fijians had during the early colonial period when she was a child. She recalled, for instance, the 'famine' that resulted in a village woman leaving a child in the forest because it could not be fed and the necessity of burning houses in which people died of contagious diseases. The marks of these Matailobau people's exposure to new diseases and to political and cultural suppression can be found, I believe, in the *bisaba*.

A visitor from the Lau Islands of Fiji in a Matailobau village commented to me that *bisaba* are held for every Matailobau child rather than for only firstborn children, as is the custom in Lau. His remark about the difference between the frequency and kind of reason that prompts Lauans to celebrate this ritual in comparison to the Matailobau reaffirmed for me the historical facts that peoples of the interior experienced colonialism differently than did Fijians of other areas. For example, Marshall Sahlins, while discussing population trends on the island of Moala, wrote that outlying islands such as Moala, 'were not hit as badly by these epidemics as was Viti Levu' (1962: 32). After the last attempt was made to retain their

autonomy in what has been called the ‘Little War’ of the Hill Tribes in 1876, the Governor of Fiji, Sir Arthur Gordon, thought that ‘the lately subjugated hill tribes, were scarcely fitted then for the rigidity of British Law. In his opinion they required to be dealt with slowly, partly in accordance with their own traditions, as far they were good, and with our law, as far as it could be made applicable’ (Brewster, 1922: 47). It is within this historical and cultural context that I want to describe the *bisaba* ritual that honours the birth of a child and its mother.

For several weeks after the delivery, mother and child are essentially kept together and away from the community until the performance of the *bisaba*. The laying in period ensures that the mother has sufficient rest in order to suckle the child without the demands of her household and gardening duties.

The ritual initiates the entrance of the infant into social life and the resumption of the mother’s daily round. At the ritual this is concretized by the mother and child being ensconced behind the parental bed’s curtains during the ritual, to emerge only after all non-household participants have left. The only times I saw a mother in the midst of a *bisaba* ceremony was when she was the adoptive mother of an infant and the other time was when the mother had delivered in the hospital in order to have a tubal ligation and returned to the village three months after the birth. In the latter case, the mother commented on the fact that it was past the time that she and the infant would have been spending time alone, and consequently, felt it unnecessary to stay within the cordoned area.

The *bisaba* is a ritual associated with women in a number of ways. First, its central symbol is the taro plant that has been an emblem of femininity from traditional times. Second, it focuses on the well being of women as mothers. Third, it encourages women’s fertility and childcare. Fourth, it is the only ritual that women control. Fifth, it is the only ritual at which women can give speeches. Finally, it is a ritual that depicts some of women’s qualities of plasticity and mutability because the women speak as representatives of either their husbands or their own consanguines. I offer as explanations for this ritual’s frequency in Matailobau men’s wish to enjoin women to maternity and childcare and to ‘co-opt’ them to do what men sometimes maintain women are reluctant to do in the name of their society’s continuance. Furthermore, I suggest that men do this on the basis of qualities that the group assigns to women.

Women and men say that women have ‘watery souls,’ *alo wai*, and their symbolic association with the bamboo water containers is apt. Women are also deemed to be soft and malleable and thus can change

their clan identities during the *bisaba* ritual and in other situations. Married women identify with their affinal clans. When I asked a married woman about her loyalty and affiliation with her natal clan, she answered that she, as do other women, have to 'forget about that'. The one occasion when married women affiliate with their consanguines is when they are members of the *wexa*, the matrilineal kin of the deceased who come to 'take their child back' for burial. Men as 'solid' beings never vacillate in their clan affiliation. But women's mutability is also connected to their potential capriciousness and that poses a danger to Matalobau society when their good will and commitment to communal endeavours are in doubt.

Originally, people said, the *bisaba* was only held for mothers and newborns. It seems that since colonial times, *bisaba* are also held when a person recovers from an illness or accident, or when one is established as a new resident in a village. A *bisaba* is a ritual whose purpose, as witnessed in the content of speeches given at these, is to wish good health and prosperity to those so honoured. People said the *bisaba* was an expression of *marau*, happiness. A new baby, recovery from an illness, and acceptance into a village are reasons for people to be joyful.

Matalobau women said that the reason why *bisaba* are so frequent here in comparison to other areas of Fiji is because of the large number of *alonaka*, good spirits, for instance, kind hearted women. A woman who is not generous, for example, does not give food to other households as *taki-taki* (approximately one person's portion of a meal), is *aloca*, a bad soul. Men corroborated this aspect of women's nature by adding that women pay more attention to village affairs and they, *vivusaki kaukauwa*, discuss strongly, which persons are in need, ailing, etc. Women claim that they spearhead most *bisaba* to help these individuals.

Visitors bring gifts of raw food, soap, kerosene, tinned fish, sugar, or flour and are reciprocated with a whale's tooth or with *yaqona*. All gifts are, however, referred to as the *ba*, cooked taro stalk. *Ba* in the form of a broth is given to newly delivered women in order to tighten their wombs and to increase their breast milk. The gifts are therefore classified as feminine because they are part of the taro plant and reciprocated with the *yaqona* associated with masculinity.

The *ba* is not given as a cooked food. Taro is typically presented as the raw tuber and the stalk. When it is offered in this way, it can become itself an item of regeneration because the stalk may be planted and produce new plants. One might propose taro symbolizes women as a gift because they are married into patrilineal clans and bring their labour immediately to these and their reproductive potential to their affines.

The word *bisaba* has two parts: *bisa* and *ba*. *Bisa* has two main definitions in the Fijian lingua franca, Bauan, to rain upon, and to accomplish an arduous task. In Matailobau, it refers to a heavy rainfall. Informants did not define *bisa* in either of the above ways. Instead, they imparted the sense of 'bringing a gift and leaving it' to *bisa*. Their synonym, when I asked for one, was *biu*, to throw out, to leave, or to put out. In discussing the ritual, people utilized the phrase *bisa na ba*, the leaving or to leave the taro stalk as its central theme.

Another synonym for *bisa* (to fall, or rain only) is *tau*; another name for *bisaba* is *tauba*. The metaphor of rain was not salient to the Matailobau. They did not give credence to an interpretation of *bisaba* as a down-pour of gifts and good wishes. Likewise, villagers did not reaffirm my suggested association between the *bisaba* and events that culminated successfully - childbirth, convalescence, and integration into a new village.

They often used the Bauan *veisiko* (pronounced in Matailobau as *visiko*) for *bisaba*. *Visiko* means to go and see someone and to give a gift. The best interpretation of its meaning then, emically derived, is that *bisa* is gifts given without any expectation of reciprocation; quite unusual for a culture where equivalences and reciprocation are patterns and values. But this is part of its significant message to women – do something without anticipating a return for the good of someone else. That something is to bear children for society. The *bisaba*, I argue, is a call to women to squelch their wilfulness and it does so by allowing them to speak this message to themselves in a ritual. In all other rituals, in public, political events only men speak. The *bisaba* is viewed as a domestic ritual, and thus a venue where women may give formulaic speeches. At the *bisaba* given for new residents in villages and for those recovering from serious illnesses, however, men give the speeches.

In the speeches, blessings are called upon for the woman and child, *vitinani*, being honoured and also for all women who have brought these gifts. The women who attend the *bisaba* are drawn into the effort of raising this child, which is a corrective to the criticism levelled against women earlier regarding their lack of collective concern about childcare, as shown in the following prayer.

Women's reluctance to be mothers may be inferred from women's statements that the *bisaba* is celebrated to 'make a woman happy'. I thought this was a strange explanation for the ritual because one assumes that having a healthy baby is a joyous event; it is if a woman wanted the baby. However with the stresses of colonialism and the relations between the genders resulting from it, motherhood became more work and less

under women's control than before.

Bringing women together at the ritual as a means of encouraging them to do all the things they did before colonial times was, I think, part of the meaning of the following prayer offered by a chiefly woman at one of the *bisaba* that I attended. This *na lotu vuravura*, a prayer asking for continuance was:

Seven, eight [said when one wants to add a statement at a proceeding],
its suckers [*vuravura*]. You women, the suckers make the *visiko* together. To the, human work/In their possession is human work. To the sowing/Tomorrow.

Vuravura is Bauan for sugar cane suckers, but here it seems to apply to the taro's suckers. It is the women and the taro that make the *bisaba*. The *bisaba* is dedicated to other people. It is a wish that the *vura* (regenerative part of taro), the newborn, the women, and the people regenerate. One might interpret this prayer as expressing a hope that things will continue because it refers to the future either in terms of potential crops or a new beginning, a new day.

The main point here is that the prayer's gist is in keeping with the *bisaba*'s orientation and employs two of its central elements – women and the regenerative part of a plant. A chiefly woman married to the highest ranked, most powerful chief in the area invoked the prayer. In Fijian terms, this chief has a channel for communication with those potent forces of the land that can sustain all life. His wife, by sharing in some measure of his chiefly substance through the mutability of her feminine lack of intrinsic, defined solidity, can implore these powers to give health and fertility to these women and their children.

While the *bisaba* concentrates on women and the mother and child dyad, it is upon closer inspection a ritual very much under the cultural control of men. First, the presentation of the gift, the *ba*, symbolically associated with women, is presented to the male household head. Second, the ritual is arranged and announced by the male village chairman, the *turanga ni koro*. Villagers said that he 'brings' the women to the *bisaba* where he can give the speech presenting the women's gifts. Third, the women attend the ritual as wives of the clans and are expected to walk together to it. The food that they bring is grown on their husbands' land.

Women and reproduction are connected in still another way in the *bisaba*; they carry food, the *ba*, because they are the gender most bound with food. But as men have hegemony over the *bisaba*, so too do they have it over women who send food to other households, in the daily practice of *takitaki*, as a way of giving men respect. Part of women's gender

description is to provide services and food because these sustain life, '*Eratou taura vakalevu na bula na yalewa ni Viti*,' Fijian women give (by hand) a great deal to life, as an elderly chief told me. Does this take some power from men?

The Fijian anthropologist Nayacakalou reporting on ceremonies welcoming him to a village in Kadavu, an island off the southern Viti Levu coast, said that after the formal presentation of a whale's tooth, *tabua*, to the village chiefs and ritual *yaqona* drinking were completed, it was understood that his intended visit had received chiefly blessings.

[But] this approval to stay in the village was given concrete and formal acknowledgement when, on the Sunday following, the village women presented me with a feast, including a whole cooked pig, in acknowledgement of the *boka* [presentation to the chief] I had presented and implying that I would now be "looked after" during my stay [my emphasis] (Nayacakalou, 1975: 61).

The Kadavu women and the women attending a *bisaba* provide the substance of well-wishing and promises to do more of the same. They literally and symbolically sustain the honoured parties by coming en masse with food. At the *bisaba*, however, they offer a promise of more food with the presentation of the taro stalk *vura*, the regenerating sucker.

In retrospect, I find it strange that men never examined the possibility that the women who truly control food in households could use the food against them. Yet the *matanivanua*, the face of the land/talking chief, said with a withering look, Fijian men *vibeci*, despise, women for being silly, capricious, and wilful. For all of this, they assume that men can control women.

Women may interpret their and men's actions and perceptions within a larger context where the men function as symbols for Matalobau culture and society and consequently women have no intention of using food against men. A woman told me 'We push our men forward' when she compared how European women treat their men in comparison to how Matalobau women behave. The value that women place on men results from the men's and their own devaluation at the hands of European colonisers. Thus, women bolster men's egos, their cultural worth, because the 'men lost so much'. Women will, to illustrate the value they place on men, respectfully skirt outside a gathering of men and tell their children to be quiet in order to not disturb the men. Similarly, women serve tea on their knees to male guests, especially at a chief's house or under a *vakatunaloa*, an open walled structure where people sit during the hot season, to display their respect for the men.

In a way, women are like the dietary staples, the tubers, the real food, *kakana dina*. Metaphorically speaking, women are the entities consumed in order for human groups to exist as they move patrilocally after their marriages and are expected to become loyal to their conjugal *mataqali*. Viewed from the perspective of the genders' culturally assigned qualities, women are malleable and men are not, thus women can change their *mataqali* membership. Again according to these gender traits, women are weaker both physically and morally in comparison to men. For example, brides need help attaining good wifely behaviour because women are *lialia*, unlearned, immature, or silly, and during the wedding ceremony a senior man instructs the bride how to act as a proper wife. Newly married men apparently do not require such assistance.

Women's link to food can be used to subvert men's enterprises and efforts toward reproduction in its various senses, as may be inferred from the *ruku* ritual and as they reportedly have done. Cyril Belshaw (1964) portrays a picture of women defying their husbands about a community development project with the only tools at their disposal - not bringing their spouses' lunches to the work site. I witnessed a comparable feminine strategy to voice women's opinion about a minister then living in the village without their ever uttering a word. The minister had come from another island without his wife. To the best of my knowledge, there had never been any acrimony between him and the women in our village. Gossip indicated, however, that this minister's wife was ill because he did not treat her well. The women held this against the minister and vented their displeasure at his farewell party. The men had killed a cow and cooked it in the big cauldrons. When they were ready to bring the meat to the communal hall in serving pots, a deacon came to notify the women who would be serving the food that the pots would soon arrive. He noticed that the women were already in the communal hall, dressed in their Sunday clothes, with the tubers placed on the food mat for serving. There were, however, no plates for the forty or so adults who would share the meal. He asked his wife about the plates. She turned to the women next to her and inquired of them which clan was supposed to bring their household plates. The women began asking each other who was supposed to carry the plates, how could such an oversight occur, who was in charge of this shameful fiasco. The deacon ordered his wife to get their plates and their other clan wives to do the same, as he walked away from the hall he called, *lialia*. Listeners took his meaning - the women are crazy, what can one expect of idiots.

The women's tactics in these two examples are possible and effective because food is important to the Matailobau. In the first place some

food is considered truly Fijian, *na kakana ni Viti*, that is, the various tubers, the real food, that is accompanied at mealtimes with the relishes of greens, fish, or meats, the *e coi*. People attach salubrious qualities to the tubers. *Na kakana ni Viti na bulabula na yagunda, e soli na bula yagunda taucoko, warai me rou na tuavimate*, Fijian food gives the body vitality, it gives total bodily health, and it prevents illness. The favourite Fijian food, the one whose leaves, stalk, and tuber are all edible is the taro identified with and under the reproductive control of women.

A person's or a group's good intentions and social transactions are concretized in food gifts and exchanges. Individuals should share with their closest natal and affinal kin portions of delicacies or seasonal food. Besides these expected offerings to certain categories of kin, food is given to build, reaffirm, or remind others of social relations. However, food's cultural worth is tied to the perception that it is not an unlimited commodity. Women in particular hold this view.

Women seem to relate to food differently than do men, and within these categories individuals vary among themselves. In general, women appear to be more concerned with eating food, obtaining their share of food than do men. Again these characteristics can be interpreted as outcomes of their respective innate, albeit culturally assigned, traits. For instance, men's intrinsic dignity is preserved if they do not admit to their hunger. Women can be expected to acquiesce to their appetite without much shame.

Food is very salient in conversations. The frequency of discussion about food, however, appears to be something apart from what one might expect to be the cultivators' usual concerns – the effects of weather, pests, and sufficient garden size on the available and future food supply. Villagers voice two kinds of interest in food. They say that Fijians eat prodigiously, as opposed to other people. Fijians value this trait because they say people should eat a lot. One might infer that Fijians want to eat a lot, as do other people (Kahn, 1986). Then by word and deed, they express other cultural meanings about food and eating that concern authority, rank, sharing, and personal worth.

Women seeing a child carrying some food or munching on it might teasingly call, 'bring it here, it should be mine/ours'. Sometimes children holding fruit and away from their houses might have these taken by older children or adults. On the other hand, adults are ready to give snacks and to serve available food to any other household's child in their house at mealtimes. I never heard a remark such as 'go home now, we are going to eat'. It should be noted, however, that children visit at houses where kin-

ship and friendship ties exist between their own and these households; they do not spend time in every village house.

A complex picture of Matailobau women emerges from the foregoing overview of different times and cultural phenomena in which they are described as potentially vacuous and unpredictable, yet oddly enough, entrusted with and given credit for societal maintenance. Such a characterization of women allows them to occupy various and perhaps conflicting roles. In the rapidly changing world of the twenty first century and given Matailobau women's attributes, they might fit into the interstitial places in society.

Ritual, gender, and food

The *rukū* showed what pains Matailobau and other peoples of the interior took to reproduce their societies and how women had to be treated as unique actors in this process. The *bisaba* clarified the weight of women's roles in Fijian society's response to its colonial encounter that has 'effectively generated overarching senses of threat and social decline' (Tomlinson, 2004:7). The *bisaba* delivers a message to the women within a cultural Fijian paradigm of indirection, for instance, using kin terms rather than first names, referring to ancestors as 'someone' and 'others' because it is deemed the more respectful thing to do (Katz, 1993: 138, 252). Showing respect to a person can prevent one from her wrath and perhaps spiritual harm; such as the assumed infertility that a father's sister's curse can generate, and secure her cooperation and good will.

Matailobau women appear to be more complex than their male counterparts in terms of having attributes that seem contradictory – in need of men's control, yet capable of organizing events to help those in need; capricious, yet directed toward nurturing everyone. Women utilize their characteristic buoyancy, energy, and willingness to enliven activities and gatherings. Both genders look forward to the arrival of women at events because that is when the fun starts.

After formal speeches and exchanges have been made at weddings, for example, the old women literally clown around, *vakavuru*, (cf. Hereniko 1994, 1995). I witnessed four old women dress in their husbands' trousers and shirts and perform a skit about the foibles of government workmen building a road. Part of this project involved the government using a military helicopter to bring concrete to the interior. Part of the humour for those present involved the show of local political clout to use a helicopter to haul concrete and then the pitfall of the pilot dropping the concrete not only unceremoniously, but without the ground crew's

knowledge. The women imitated the whirling helicopter, the thundering concrete and the workmen on the ground running for safety and way from the megalith flying from the sky. I remember the skit to this day.

These women behaved as fools and in such a role could do social commentary, in this instance, how puffed up must be the persons who brought a helicopter to 'drop' concrete in gardens in order to make a two lane road. Men would lose their dignity if they spoofed the way the women did. But women can literally clown around and in some situations be called *lialia*, but in other times and circumstances be held in high esteem, and, as I think the two rituals here imply, in awe.

The First Fruits Ceremony

To this point, I have attended to the connections between women and food; here I turn to the cultural ties made between men and food. James West Turner's paper (1984) on 'true food' and the first fruit ritual explains why yams – the iconic masculine cultigen – serves as the offering in this ritual instead of the taro that supplies most of Matailobau people's diet. The yam's shape and relative 'firmness' vis-à-vis taro suggests maleness. This ceremony's objective is the attainment of life forces for the coming annual cycle from ancestral male deities. The most appropriate vehicle, then, for the offering to these ancestors is a masculine sacrifice – the yam. Additionally, Turner proposes that yams are seasonal and 'therefore suitable symbols for the ebb and flow of life' for which the Matailobau wish the ancestors would provide sustenance and ultimately societal continuance (1984: 141). As with yam production in Tikopia, Turner believes that yams are cultivated in order to serve this rite of increase and not as a means for a stable food source. The cultigen that gives this stability to human existence is taro that is continually being planted, harvested, and eaten.

When one juxtaposes the qualities of the genders against those of the foods with which they are aligned, an improbable match occurs: the capricious, supposedly wilful women are linked to the enduring, dependable taro and the seasonal food source is tied to the men who are the women's moral superiors because of their more serious and stable natures. Another element of what seems like a contradiction in this cultural system is that during the first fruits ritual the *wild* variety of yam is offered to the men by the women who venture into the *veikau*, the forest, and dig the yams. The forest is a bewildering place because it has few discernible markers for one's orientation and the mocking, human-like call of a bird adds to the sense of being outside the structure of a well-

ordered society that the chiefly system led by men anchors in the village.

The wild yams differ from domesticated yams not only by which gender presents them in the first fruits ceremony, because wild yams have to be leached after they are cooked and are presented on platters as a kind of mash and eaten without salt.

Lastly, the domesticated and wild yams are contrasted by who plants them. Men plant domestic yams and the Christian God or the *kalou vu*, the ancestral deities, the roots (*vu*) of these people plant the wild ones. Women take the produce of their spirit beings into the ritual. It might be expected that the fruits emanating from God or the *kalou vu* would be venerated in comparison to the domestic yam and lend a solemnity to that part of the ritual where they are offered and consumed. The opposite is true. Turner says 'In contrast to the presentation of the *i sevu ni kalou* [first fruits ceremony for the gods], the *i sevu ni koile* [the ceremony of the wild yams] is a much more relaxed and light-hearted affair due, I suspect, to the central role played by women as much as anything else' (1984: 140).

A question that Turner does not raise is why women should participate in a first fruits ritual devoted to male ancestors utilizing a masculine vehicle for sacrifice and communication. I suggest that women are metaphoric of the unpredictable but potentially life-giving forest, the source that yields assistance to humans when they are most in need. The resources for homebuilding exist in the forest; so do the foods Matailobau have relied upon during famine times – wild tubers such as the yam. The wild yams - planted by the *kalou vu* – brought by women to the first fruits ritual are a means of having men acknowledge that the vicissitudes of life are not under men's control even though the men proffer yams they have produced to the *vu*. It takes women, upon whom men rely but who men admit are wilful, unpredictable, but also committed to sustaining life, to figuratively and literally carry this message into the first fruits ceremony.

The foods used in the *bisaba* and the first fruits ceremony were also parts of the *ruku*. An inversion exists in the *ruku*, however: the wild yam appears as the masculine symbol on top of the domestic cultigen, the feminine symbol, the taro. Why use the wild variety in a conjugal diorama?

Perhaps the propinquity of the wild yam to the *kalou vu*, the real sources of life forces, are more appropriate male consorts for women than the domesticated yams. This may be repeated symbolically when women seek the wild yams – their *spouses* of yore - for the first fruits ceremony to complete the metaphor for human reproduction that is the ceremony's ultimate goal.

Conclusion

I believe that the *ruku* and the *bisaba* although separated by generations convey continuities and transformations of gender qualities that explain why the *bisaba* could have been celebrated more often within this region than in other areas of Fiji. They also attest to the usefulness of ritual as a device to reaffirm cultural values and concerns. These rituals and everyday speech about gender display the inconsistencies of cultural ideas and symbols that people can have and how they might be used to meet the vicissitudes of life.

The stalwart men, their yam production and its ritual first fruits presentation to deities to garner prosperity produces neither the crop upon which they depend most for food nor the totality of the means for such propitiation without a wild food gathered by women who themselves are deemed weak and unpredictable. Likewise, it is within the Matailobau cultural calculus that the malleable women capable of speaking at a ritual focused on their fertility and maternity should find the voice to speak either as members of their natal or affinal group all the while articulating men's authority. Women metaphorically occupy interstitial places from which they can muster natal loyalties that translate into land use for their affines, succour from their agnates for their affines in times of need, and their agnates' great emotional fondness for themselves and their children in this patrilineal and patrilocal system.

Food, in a general sense, in Matailobau culture seems to differ in some of its meanings by gender: Women are, in the main, more willing to admit to their hunger and this seeming lack of control over their biological needs corresponds to their cultural traits. Men do not routinely acknowledge such needs, in order to preserve their dignity that comes from their moral fibre, *lewe*, their common substance. In comparison, men and women Wamirans of Papua New Guinea, appear to have more homogeneous attitudes to food across gender boundaries. Their assigned meanings to food vary from those of the Matailobau.

Matailobau insist on sharing food, indeed sharing most material goods, and infrequently refer to its bounty or absence, and not merely to the social functions it performs. I could not imagine writing about the Matailobau as Kahn does, within another Melanesian context: 'For Wamirans, food is the symbol, and a digestive idiom the metaphor, by which they define themselves as biologically needy yet controlled – in other words, human yet social – beings' (1986: 2). Instead, as these rituals show, Matailobau people's interest is in producing and gathering food, but not necessarily viewing food in these contexts as something to con-

trol, as Wamirans do.

In their use of food, Wamirans display an overriding cultural emphasis on control. This passion for control parallels their definitions of human nature; they see human beings, and especially themselves, as innately selfish and greedy. They integrate this understanding of their biological needs and desires with their social values, which are those of sharing with and caring for one another (Kahn, 1986: 1).

Matailobau emphasize commensality and exchange as a means to overcome any latent or unarticulated individual needs or wants. This is not to say that Matailobau do not record quantities in exchanges, they do. But the overriding tone is to overlay this with the sharing aspect of exchanges. In the rituals described here, people gathered in the communal halls for the *ruku* and one assumes that meals were taken within them. The *bisaba* has a direct exchange of food gifts for *yaqona*. The first fruits ceremony provides food for the *i taukei*, the 'owners of the land' and their ancestral gods and then a communal meal of wild yams given to people by their deities.

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