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## 5 A Tsunami from the Mountains: Interpreting the Nadi Flood

### 5.1 Introduction: “A Tsunami from the Mountains”<sup>24</sup>

In Fiji, recent large-scale flooding events have brought growing attention to climate change in both political and public areas. This paper will examine how climate change is both present and absent in popular accounts of early 2012 floods in Nadi (Western Viti Levu), as well as local understandings of perceived environmental changes and acceptable coping strategies.<sup>25</sup> Fiji is exposed to a range of geological, climatological and hydrological hazards, but suffers especially from cyclones, which sweep the country during the season extending from November to April. In addition to damage caused by strong winds, cyclones and tropical depressions tend to generate floods of variable intensity (McGree, Yeo and Devi, 2010). There is a general scholarly consensus that climate change may contribute to an increase in the frequency and/or intensity of extreme weather events in Fiji and other Pacific islands groups in the near future (Barnett and Campbell, 2010; Government of the Republic of Fiji, 2012; Koshy, 2007). Episodes of high intensity rainfall combined with increasing population pressure and ongoing changes in Fiji’s watersheds (through deforestation, intensification of agriculture, urbanization, expanding tourism, etc.) may result in intensified flooding (Chandra and Dalton, 2010). Furthermore, coastal erosion and storm surge inundation are expected to worsen as a consequence of sea level rise (Gravelle and Mimura, 2008).

On the 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> March 2012, a tropical depression bringing heavy rains caused widespread flooding in Fiji, particularly in the Western Division. Several people were killed and 15,000 sought shelter in evacuation centres. These floods resulted in extensive damage, amounting to at least US \$40 million, which does not include the estimated cost of damage to houses (OCHA, 2012: 3). The town of Nadi,

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<sup>24</sup> The expression “tsunami from the mountains” is cited by M. Wise in an article published by the *Fiji Times* (1 April 2012).

<sup>25</sup> This text was written shortly after ESFO Bergen’s conference (November 2012), before the passage of cyclone Winston, which caused massive destruction in Fiji in February 2016. For this reason, cyclone Winston is not mentioned in this chapter.

the third largest urban centre and tourist capital of Fiji, was severely hit. Nadi is located on the western coast of Viti Levu, the biggest and most populated island of Fiji's archipelago. The town had a population of 42,284 in 2007, but it also hosts a large transient population of foreign tourists from the nearby international airport. Nadi is situated at the junction of two major river systems, which merge in the town, and most of its surface lies 6 metres below mean sea level. The existing flood risk could be now worsened by various factors, including climate change induced sea level rise (*Fiji Times*, 15 April 2012), land use practices leading to soil erosion and river sedimentation (like agriculture and forestry business) and increased development in flood paths (*FT*, 7 March 2011). Nadi's flood victims have stressed the extreme velocity of the water rise, which caught them off guard and, in parts of the town, caused "utter and complete" devastation (*FT*, 2 April 2012a; *Agence France Press*, 3 April 2012). The shock was amplified by the fact that Nadi had already been flooded from the 21<sup>st</sup> January till the first days of February 2012, and was in the process of recovering. In January 2009, the town had also suffered devastating floods, whose economic consequences were still being felt in 2012.

Over the past fifteen years, a growing number of studies have focused on the socio-economic impacts of environmental hazards in Fiji, on local policy and practice in disaster management and on existing or potential options for climate change adaptation and resilience to disasters.<sup>26</sup> Climate change has become a priority for the Fijian government (GRF, 2012) and a great deal of effort has been devoted to assessing its effects and raising awareness among the public and stakeholders. However, little research has been carried out on the processes that mediate perceptions of environmental risk and influence response (or lack of response) at a community level. How is Nadi's population interpreting such a striking succession of large scale flooding events, the scientific concept of climate change that is being disseminated, and the possible link between the two? To what extent do popular views diverge from government and experts' approaches, question them or converge with them? Are the floods seen as an inevitability or as a phenomenon which can be fought, stopped or contained? What are the solutions finally recommended or already adopted at the community level to cope with floods and climate change—actual and anticipated? We will explore these topics using a case study conducted in Narewa, a village community close to the town centre of Nadi.<sup>27</sup> Narewa is a mostly indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*) village and the place of residence of the Tui Nadi, a high-ranking traditional chief who

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance: Holland, 2009; Lal, Singh and Holland, 2009; Méheux, Dominey-Howes and Lloyd, 2010; Méheux, 2007; Mataka, Koshy and Nair, 2006; Veitayaki, 2006; Veitayaki and Sivo, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> The field research in Narewa was conducted in December 2011 and May-June 2012, and was funded by a post-doctoral grant from the AXA Research Fund. We will also draw upon field research conducted in the northern Yasawa for the French Laboratory of Excellence "Coral Reefs Facing Global Change" (Labex Corail). Interviews were conducted in English and all quotations in this chapter are drawn from fieldwork materials.

has authority over nine villages.<sup>28</sup> The Narewa clans are the traditional landowners of Denarau, a tourist complex built on a group of artificial islets, which features a high-end residential development and several luxury hotels. Government approval had also been given for a casino resort project, expected to open by October 2013 but which has been delayed ever since. The tourist complex provides substantial leasing income to Narewa village and is also a major source of employment for its inhabitants. The data collected may help to explain how the influence of climate change is perceived in urban Fiji, particularly in relation to other anthropogenic stressors such as urban development, intensive agriculture and mass tourism, and why some Fijian communities may consider relocation in the name of climate change a far worse option than “dealing with disasters.” It may also provide information on existing coping strategies and on the combining of traditional and “modern” skills or resources (such as tourism) in order to resist the impact of increasing flooding and respond to forecasts and present realities of climate change.

## 5.2 Explaining the Floods

The January-February and March-April 2012 events have caused widespread concern and triggered a nationwide discussion about the root causes of flooding, especially in the Nadi area. The government and media have both portrayed global climate change as a major culprit and stressed the need for global political action for mitigating climate change as well as local adaptive strategies: for the scale of the havoc following the floods would seem to hint at future devastation, should Fiji fail to adapt. In September 2012, Fiji’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, addressed the 67<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly as follows:

In Fiji, we experienced our worst flooding on record during the months of January and April this year. [...] as a people who live on a group of small islands in the South Pacific, we feel particularly vulnerable. The ongoing failure of the international community to seriously address climate change means we will all see more frequent and more intense weather events (Kubuabola, 2012).

After the floods, repeated calls for national vigilance and a stream of suggestions for improving preparedness were made. Nadi’s residents, in particular, were urged to become more risk-conscious and, if worst comes to worst, to anticipate a massive relocation of the city (*FT*, 12, 15, 16 and 20 April 2012). On the national scale, efforts to improve public understanding of climate change issues have also led to the

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<sup>28</sup> Ratu Sailosi Dawai had just been declared the new Tui Nadi when this research was undertaken. However, he passed away in 2016. His younger brother, Ratu Vuniyani Navuniuci Dawai, was confirmed Tui Nadi by the *iTaukei* Lands and Fisheries Commission in April 2017.

endorsement by the Fiji Cabinet of a *iTaukei* Climate Change Glossary, translating foreign expressions such as “climate change” (*draki veisau*) and “carbon dioxide” (*kaboni dokosaiti*) into the vernacular idiom. Furthermore, the floods have raised concern about the fast-urban development in the Western division: some have denounced the influence on flooding of soil erosion, poor drainage, unsustainable farming practices or land reclamation (*FT*, 7 February 2012; *Fiji Sun*, 21 April 2012). However, this argument has been opposed by the Nadi Chamber of Commerce, whose president publicly claimed that climate change and heavy rain were the primary causes (*FT*, 10 April 2012a). Moreover, some officials and journalists have alleged that Fiji’s population was underprepared for natural disasters and that a lack of awareness and negligence or complacency had worsened the impact of flooding (*FT*, 1, 2b and 3 April 2012).

Narewa, which is located along the Nadi river, was severely touched by both flood events, the last one being unanimously qualified as the *worst ever* in local history. According to witnesses’ statements, the March-April flood was exceptional in several respects. Firstly, it occurred after a short period of rainfall following a clear day, not after a prolonged period of heavy downpour as was usual. Secondly, the rise of the water was unexpectedly fast, taking only two to three hours to completely flood the village. Lastly, the water reached exceptional levels: informants talked of six to seven feet on the village green and up to five feet in private houses. The damage was severe and the army had to intervene to clear the enormous amounts of silt and debris left by the receding floodwaters. For many inhabitants, such a series of floods could not be seen as a regular, understandable natural event, but instead indicated a rupture and disorganization of the natural order of things. While small-scale flooding is said to have positive effects (like bringing new plants and cleaning the land), the last floods have been described as unexpected, destructive events that local traditional lore was unable to circumvent. A tourism activities leader reckoned that Narewa was indeed a “dry place” (contrary to others like Rewa, in eastern Viti Levu, where inhabitants “have been wet all the time”) and that the present reversal of conditions had caught the population largely unprepared: “when it’s wet, people are lost.” The urban location of Narewa village and very good access to public media have certainly favoured the awareness of global climate change among the inhabitants (which seems to be lower in rural eastern Viti Levu. Cf. Lata and Nunn, 2012; Nolet, 2016) and, during the field study, various potential manifestations of global climate change were mentioned. For example, one resident assumed that “climate change” had caused a decline in the productivity of mango and banana trees and yams, while taro (which, he said, could not be grown properly in the past and had had to be brought from humid areas like Naitasiri and Suva) was now growing locally. Hence, climate change was seen to contribute to a change in local eating habits and to the undermining of the cultural knowledge associated with them. Yet changes in marine ecology, such as the disappearance of the *babale* shellfish used in traditional medicine, were attributed far more often to coastal activity and the tourism industry than to global

climate change. Equally, while many respondents believed that climate change was a contributing factor to the floods (by influencing the rain pattern or increasing flood levels through sea level rise), only two young people considered it to be the main cause. As will be seen, others invoked a range of social, economic, political or even spiritual malfunctions to explain the increasing floods. A middle-aged man, very involved in church activities, even stated that global climate change was non-existent and that floods were ordinary natural manifestations experienced since time immemorial: “I don’t believe in climate change. It has been the same all over. Day comes, and night goes. It rains, it goes. It’s still the same world God puts us in.” Such a refusal of climate change may involve the idea that human agency (through greenhouse gas emissions etc.) cannot profoundly alter the world God created, or reshape creation. In a sense, accepting climate change scientific narrative would be tantamount to endorsing an alternative explanation for what only God can do.

On the contrary, some other villagers saw in climate change and extraordinary floods a clear expression of God’s power and agency (which climate change scientific narrative thus contributed to reaffirm). For instance, it was argued that an increase in extreme weather events was reminiscent of events described in the Apocalypse and possibly announced the imminent coming of Judgment Day. Such a divine origin would make technical preparation or relocation pointless, even dangerous, as no one is supposed to go against God’s will. One elderly man thus admitted that he did not leave his house at the height of the floods because he intended to submit to God’s plans. “It’s in the Bible. Some they run away and they search a place to hide. You can’t go. You can’t go away. [...] I was sitting just down here and sing, and pray, and thank God.” This apocalyptic focus has been echoed both in the national press and on various websites run by expatriate Fijians: “Rumour has it that Nadi is reliving biblical history, and will suffer the same fate of the two infamous cities in Lot’s time. But I find comfort remembering God’s promise to mankind after Noah’s flood” (*FT*, 27 April 2012a). Other interpretations involving supernatural agency have been recorded in Ba province. In Vuake village (Matacawalevu, Yasawa), informants asserted that the Christian God used extreme weather events to attract man’s attention and that the recent floods were a punishment for the “Western” style of life of Nadi’s population, the focus on capitalistic development and less commitment to traditional and Christian duties:

That is God teaching them. God’s telling them: ‘You have plenty money and you forgot me’. In Nadi. Because they have plenty money. Everything in Nadi. Everything. Hotels, Airport... ‘Well, you have money but you forgot me. You have to change, come back, I love you, come back.’

In this rural location, but also by some of its own inhabitants, Nadi tends to be considered the epitome of modernization gone haywire. This belief implies an unprecedented preoccupation with money, idleness induced by leasing income, a severing of community ties due to disputes over land tenure and chiefly titles, and a

breaking with some central *iTaukei* values: honouring chiefs, customs and parents, and respecting Christian morals. Some have even wondered whether the floods could represent a spiritual cleansing or *veivakasavasavataki* process (similar to those undertaken by the Methodist Church)<sup>29</sup> to wash away Nadi's sins (*FT*, 27 April 2012b). Similarly, a person writing in the *Fiji Times* suggested that the floods may have expressed "nature's disapproval" of the casino project, which has been believed by some to bring immorality to Fiji and to go against Christian teachings (*FT*, 4 April 2012). However, such an idea was never encountered in Narewa, whose inhabitants own the land where the casino was supposed to be built and where some talked of easterners' "plain jealousy" of Denarau's good fortune. No one in Narewa mentioned either the idea that the floods were an ancestral or divine testing of the military government<sup>30</sup> or a spiritual punishment for the abolition of the Great Council of Chiefs,<sup>31</sup> arguments which could be found on the websites of opponents to the military regime in 2012.<sup>32</sup>

Religious interpretations are combined with others focusing on the characteristics of Nadi's rivers and streams, ecological deterioration and the impact of coastal development. A former village headman of Narewa (*turaga ni koro*) was one of the few to suggest that Nadi's river should be straightened and widened to be able to properly drain rainwater running down from the mountains. A vast majority of informants also mentioned the influence of soil erosion on the river system through deforestation, construction, aggregate mining and poor farming practices. The responsibility would lie with insufficiently controlled or cynical developers, but also with *iTaukei* communities who would neglect their land while working in cities and "going the Western way":

'They are not planting anymore trees, too. They are just building more houses, houses... No one is planting anything, they are all going to work. No one wants to plant trees, do the hard job. They all want to be modernized now.'

Here again disaster is understood as a consequence of the *iTaukei*'s changing lifestyle, which is viewed by many as a corruption of identity that is coming to a head in western Fiji. This analysis is reminiscent of the classic opposition made between

<sup>29</sup> According to G. Pigliasco, Methodist officials in Suva would rather use the expression *veivakavoui vakayalo kei na veivakaduavatataki* or "spiritual renewal and reconciliation" (2012: 51).

<sup>30</sup> In December 2006, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama overthrew the elected government of Laisenia Qarase, which he accused of corruption and racial discrimination against the Indo-Fijian population (Fraenkel, Firth and Lal, 2009). A military government was in power from 2006 to 2014. Voreqe Bainimarama won the general election of September 2014 and was sworn in as the Prime Minister of Fiji.

<sup>31</sup> The Great Council of Chiefs (*Bose Levu Vakaturaga*) was an institutional body of traditional chiefs with wide constitutional powers. It was suspended by the military government in April 2007 and abolished by decree in March 2012.

<sup>32</sup> See Tomlinson, 2013: 82-4 on religious argumentation against the coup and Commander Bainimarama's political programme.

the “way of the land” (that is the traditional, genuine *iTaukei* style of life, based on kinship, giving and community duties) and the “way of money,” which characterizes Western societies (Toren, 1989; Williksen-Bakker, 2002). In a sense, working in town and constant pressure to make money are thought to alter indigenous Fijians’ relationships to their ancestral lands, with disastrous consequences: the ancestors’ heritage is neglected, even rejected entirely, and clan members are gradually forgetting how to make use of their own natural resources, trapping themselves in monetary exchange and the need for imported food products. A middle-aged man thus believed that a general change in lifestyle and the modernization of village infrastructure had led to ecological deterioration in Narewa: various food trees and medicinal plants which used to thrive in this village were disappearing because of a lack of care and interest (“nobody uses them anymore”), while the nearby river was becoming heavily polluted and unsuitable for bathing and fishing because of sewage spilling into it. It was also said that drainage work which used to be done by the villagers was no longer carried out, with possible consequences on river sedimentation and flooding impact. While the responsibility of communities was often mentioned, some asserted that the Fijians could do very little to protect their own environment, all community efforts being spoiled by heavy polluters and dishonest developers who should be “the ones to pay” to reverse the current ecological damage.

On the other hand, in Narewa this rarely leads to frank criticism of tourism, which is by far the primary source of income,<sup>33</sup> even if unwelcome effects are widely recognized. Some regretted a weakening of village taboos through daily contact with tourists and the introduction of Western ways, others a disappearance of hunting and picnic areas now converted into residences, golf courses and hotels. It was even claimed that the villagers had lost their “food chain” due to the building of Denarau (which was described as highly fertile land before construction works and as the former “fish supermarket” of Narewa), and that local men were weaker, smaller and less virile than their forefathers as a consequence of the change in their diet (cf. Clark, 1989, on “shrinking” feelings of Wiru men of Papua New Guinea as a consequence of missionary proselytization, and Tomlinson, 2004). Moreover, the constant passage of cruise liners or dive boats combined with hotel activity and waste disposal is thought to impact the coral reef and fish stocks. One villager also considered that the leasing system could foster community tensions and lead to a distressing splitting up of families: “it’s better in Rewa, somewhere where there is no hotel, because people are still eating together there.” Regarding flood risks, some were of the opinion that extensive removal of mangroves and coastal urbanization may have caused drainage problems and led to flooding. However, only one woman openly supported the current assumption that the Denarau complex itself could be the ultimate cause of flooding, by

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<sup>33</sup> A middle-aged hairdresser from Narewa thus explained: “It’s good, they come, it helps our country [...] If they stop tourism, I don’t think that we will survive.”

hampering the river's ability to discharge water into the sea (cf. *FT*, 8 June 2011). Finally, residents invoked human failures to explain the particular severity of the March-April flooding. While some accused the National Weather Office of not issuing a proper warning, many mentioned that an accidental or deliberate opening of Vaturu dam's spillway gates could have been responsible for the flood: "This kind of current that came, it was different. It was like man-made."<sup>34</sup> Equally, poor-planning, insufficient funding and a lack of coordination between various development agencies were seen as having resulted in bad drainage and contributed to flooding throughout the Nadi area. In summary, environmental changes are mainly interpreted as the result of inner malfunctioning and chiefly lead to self-blame, societal criticism or the denunciation of local politics. In Narewa climate change narrative is present but secondary, or even encapsulated into a religious interpretative scheme making weather change a spiritual sanction or message, responding (again) to local dynamics.

### 5.3 Coping with Flood Risks

On the national scale, two main solutions to Nadi's flooding have been put forward. The first one is a partial diversion of the Nadi river, once said to be considered the "best option" by Nadi's business community,<sup>35</sup> but which would necessitate the evacuation of two villages (*FT*, 15 May 2012; *FS*, 17 July 2012). The other, the relocation of Nadi's city centre and other vulnerable areas, has been supported by scientists and climate change activists. For instance, Prof. Patrick Nunn, professor of oceanic geoscience, has argued that dredging rivers, diverting the mouth of Nadi's river or replanting trees would not solve a flood problem caused chiefly by climate change-induced sea level rise and that relocation was "inevitable" (*FT*, 15 April 2012). On the other hand, in Narewa, an overwhelming majority of residents have agreed that relocating the whole village or their own family or clan was hardly feasible, nor desirable. During the field study conducted in 2012, only a handful of residents wanted to resettle in a higher, safer area, almost all being women and men from other villages married to locals. An elderly man from Narewa who stated that village relocation was the sole viable solution, since sea level rise would keep worsening flood risks in the future, was a notable exception. Such statement was obviously based on scientific predictions concerning global warming, which are conveyed by the Fijian media and local or foreign environmental organizations. However, while many people in Narewa were aware of such scientific discourse and interpreted some perceived "natural irregularities" through it, few inferred that global climate change could lead

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<sup>34</sup> Popular rumour was strong enough for a statement denying it to be made in the national press.

<sup>35</sup> In the aftermath of floods, the president of Nadi's Chamber of Commerce argued that the relocation of Nadi town was "an impossible task" and unacceptably costly (*FT*, 10 April 2012b).

to resettlement in a close or distant future. More precisely, although migration may be considered a suitable solution by some Pacific communities, scientists or political leaders,<sup>36</sup> it is certainly the worst option for Narewa people (this even leading some to underestimate the level of environmental change or to dismiss climate change as an important issue). Financial and logistical barriers were invoked, but most inhabitants also stated that they were used to the place and that leaving would perhaps be worse than staying and enduring chronic losses due to floods, especially because it equated to a shameful abandonment of ancestral lands. Strong ties exist between indigenous Fijian clans and the particular territorial areas (*vanua*) they are identified with. Relocating would mean breaking links with ancestors buried on these communal lands, as well as abandoning their *yavu* (ancient house foundations), which express the antiquity of family lines and their respective status. The land itself had come to hold *mana*, or spiritual power, over time. As a resident put it: “the further you go from this village, the crops don’t grow nicely.” Some have stressed the difficulty of taming a new environment and the cultural erosion which could result from relocation. It was even suggested that relocation would cause a loss of customary identity and upset social order:

Now everything is good because they know where they come from, what *mataqali*, what *yavusa*, what *tokotoko*,<sup>37</sup> and they are very sure with that, but if they gonna move, everything gonna be misplace.

Furthermore, inhabitants have argued that staying in Narewa offered them both easy access to the town centre and an inexpensive lifestyle, with the possibility to plant their own crops and to mobilize kin solidarity whenever needed. Such a perfect combination of village and city life, each with its own practical advantages, would not be easily found elsewhere. Moreover, the present position of Narewa is very close to the Denarau complex, which is extremely convenient for the many tourism workers, especially for night shifts. A young educated man argued as well that relocating was pointless, because “even going to another place, you will still face the same thing,” referring to the extensive flooding of the Nadi area. For many, relocation seems difficult to accept, but neither do river diversion and straightening raise much hope (“unless they make it big like Mississippi,” added a resident). Most inhabitants were sceptical about the possibility of controlling such a large mass of water and reckoned that the floods would not cease, whatever the government tried, because as one man put it: “nature, you can’t go against it.” Equally, most people considered dredging as an

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**36** See the case of Napuka islanders in the Tuamotu archipelago (French Polynesia), who recently sought asylum from the neighbouring Marquesas islands where their ancestors originally came from. Chaumeau, 2011.

**37** These are clan and sub-clan units.

insufficient, costly option, which had already demonstrated its limits.<sup>38</sup> Such fatalistic statements seemed to rely only partially on the scientific discourse on climate change and its irreversibility, and far more on concrete observations of a constant worsening of floods and of an upsetting of the local natural balance: both being the result of an array of factors, of which sociocultural changes were not the least. The March-April flood, indeed, was widely considered as an irresistible giant wave not originating from the outside but from the interior, from the nearby mountains and, one would say, from societal factors such as land misuse and spiritual corruption (thus involving a political and spiritual response before a diplomatic or technical one). Even if pessimism dominates on the grounds that water levels have kept rising in recent years (although some added the reminder that “Only God knows”), a vast majority of residents are determined to stay, seeing Narewa not as an unsafe environment, but as land which must be cared for, protected and occupied whatever the cost:

We have decided to say that it's part of life, that we will have this kind of situation [...] So this is where we will be for the rest of our life, [we] just face it, learn from it, live with it, accept it, move on.

For a majority of respondents, the best option would be to stay on the same area of land but acquire a two-storey house, which is believed to offer sufficient security even during the biggest floods. One may even wonder whether the brave and humble acceptance of current flood risks is considered by some a virtue and a part of the needed response to God's warning expressed by the recent floods.

While few people seemed to trust large-scale technical solutions, interviewees from Narewa appeared highly confident in their own ability to recover from floods, relying on their own social or moral resources. The villagers did not usually claim to be culturally prepared to face the floods, as do the people of Rewa province (Nolet, 2016), but believed kinship and traditional relationships (i. e. ceremonial and political links between clans and land units) would prove powerful tools for recovery: kin and fellow clans linked to the Tui Nadi can offer material help and shelter to affected families, while expatriate Fijians are strongly expected to send money. Both tourism income and *iTaukei* customary solidarity are counted on to provide a certain security, helping villagers to endure chronic losses and to continue occupying the land of their forefathers (who are also the original source of their rights to the village's treasure, Denarau island):

Our hotel, the industry, has provided a lot of money too in the village. Every day. Every week. [...] And Fijian custom, when you work, you're not only working for you. You work for everybody.

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<sup>38</sup> The villagers of Lomanikoro, Rewa (South-East of Viti Levu), expressed very different views about the efficacy of dredging during an anthropological study that we conducted in 2011. Contrary to Narewa, this flood-prone village had not experienced a large flood event for some years and dredging was widely considered there to be a useful protective technique.

[...] If you get \$300, \$200 a week, you can go shopping \$100. The rest of the hundred will go somewhere else. Like \$20 for the death, \$20 for the new-born child that side, and the aunty came and asks for \$10, and you have to buy salt and kerosene for grandfather. We have to do it like that. That's why life in the village rolls on. It doesn't stop.

It was stated as well that residents had learnt, through experience, how to quickly return the village to its normal state and to clean it up efficiently. And indeed, the village was impressively clean and neat of debris only six weeks after the flood. One resident was even convinced that the villagers had inherited from their ancestors a physical capacity to resist flood impacts: "The people are used to this, even small children [...] they have a system that works well with the flood, it can stop them from getting sick and all [...] Our body is just accustomed to everything about the flood, we are used to it." Additionally, some inferred that the villagers had gained in patience and humility through their recent experiences of disaster, as if the successive floods had taught them how to live with fewer material possessions and how to be less emotionally affected by their losses, this contributing as well to resilience in the widest sense.<sup>39</sup>

Over here we are used to it. Even when the flood comes, never mind we lose our stuff, we laugh and smile, because we are used to the flood [...] We can't see anymore people buying anymore settee, like this. We don't wanna buy lots of beds. People are just careless, now. [...] Better you just put the mat, everybody sleep on the mattress, we gonna lose, lose, lose, all the time [...] Because in Fiji every house we want to fill it up with all the necessities. But now we change our mind, keep us free, it's better.

Therefore, even if certain specific actions and improvements are expected from the government, especially tighter controls on urban planning and drainage, villagers seem to rely heavily on their own resources to face future flooding hazards. This coping logic (which contradicts an often-heard accusation of "State-dependency" at the community level) appears to rely on various grounds, such as: the utmost importance of staying in the traditional village site; scepticism about the possibility of controlling the flooding process in the short-term; submission to a divine agency; a deep trust in the adaptive power of *iTaukei* culture; and even a cultural tendency to consider dangers and hardships only once they have materialized. Tourism is also considered a possible coping strategy. Some villagers have proposed to convert Narewa into a tourist centre which would offer the full spectrum of *iTaukei* culture to overseas visitors. Proposed attractions included a guided tour presenting village life, cultural shows like firewalking, popular resort entertainment such as *meke* (dancing), massages, hair braiding, *lovo* (earth oven) feasts, and more. The core idea is to take

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<sup>39</sup> In a sense, floods are thought to have a purifying effect, leading or forcing people to live in a more Christian manner: they don't only punish or warn, but provide the conditions for moral improvement through poverty, the strengthening of community ties or the overcoming of existing conflicts.

advantage of the large transient population of foreign tourists (many of whom converge on the Manamuca and Yasawa island resorts after a short stay in Nadi) and offer them a cultural experience adapted to expected Western taste, which may not be found in package resorts. One of the project developers did not see the tour as a possibly destabilizing factor or threat to village taboos but, on the contrary, as an opportunity to “liven up” the village, upgrade infrastructure and bolster cultural knowledge while “making money.” Such a project would help to build financial resilience to the floods, but it would also provide autonomy vis-à-vis the foreign companies which have invested in Denarau and their uncontrollable financial dynamics and relations with the government. This project is reminiscent of other initiatives to develop community-based tourist enterprises and economic self-reliance through *vanua* resources, in which the combining of Western entrepreneurship and the village ethos (a life lived “in the way of the land” or *vakavanua*) can turn out to be a major challenge (Farrelly, 2009). In Narewa, some seemed to consider that a small-scale community project under local leadership could be a far better option than dependence on large foreign companies which can easily “outrun” both landowners and employees.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Arguably, the 2012 floods highlighted the issue of climate change more forcefully than ever before in Fiji. For some, especially in the political and media arenas (where the influence of climate science is strong), the floods “made visible” the devastation potentially awaiting this oceanic country in the near future, should the Fijians fail to react promptly. Apocalyptic visions were omnipresent both in the national press and in government rhetoric, but the situation also offered an opportunity to illustrate and foster national unity through interethnic solidarity during recovery operations. However, there are still conflicting views about the cause of these floods, the part played by global climate change and even on what global climate change is all about. Whereas most community members interviewed were conscious of the reality of global anthropogenic climate change (even citing precise local effects), floods seemed to be chiefly seen as the result of internal Fijian dynamics, in particular environmental and societal deterioration. Both in Narewa and in the northern Yasawa, many assumed that flooding was a direct consequence of land mismanagement, excessive coastal urbanization, poor development choices and the corruption of local customs and values, whether this was expressed within a religious framework or secular one. It is fairly clear that the 2012 floods have been incorporated into a cultural frame of reference linking natural disasters to social disruptions, and promoting self-transformation or patient acceptance as possible responses, but also that they have intensified popular questioning about Fiji’s economic destinies. At the community level, the floods appear to have revived a longstanding debate about the proper limits to development and Westernization, and the balance to be

achieved between the “way of the land” and the “way of money.” For some, the floods even represented a violent reality check, reminding Fijians that caring for their environment, ceasing to fell and burn forests indiscriminately, had become a crucial challenge. This is far from leading to a general rejection of Western forms of economic development: in the Nadi area, tourism is even considered to be a recovery tool and an asset in coping with the current environmental threat. Nonetheless, some pleaded for better political control of local and foreign companies and for the development of community-based enterprises, which would preserve some key aspects of *vanua* culture, offer job security and even give tourism “back” to village-dwelling Fijians. Furthermore, we have observed that the floods served to foster critical thinking about consumerism and aggressive commercial pressure to acquire comfort goods in urban areas: some villagers explained that the floods had encouraged them to keep “free of things,” so as to improve their resilience and practical effectiveness during emergency operations. Finally, it has appeared that many were sceptical about the solutions under discussion at the municipal and national levels for improving flood preparedness and resilience. In particular, we have seen that most villagers consider relocation impractical or inappropriate, even worse indeed than property loss and a present sense of insecurity. Some community members pleaded for an in-depth review of urban planning and ecological assessments, while others advocated social or ritual readjustments, for instance a reviving of the Christian spirit and religious activity. In the aftermath of the March-April flood, Narewa community members seemed to pin their hopes first and foremost on their own ability to cope with floods and not on the authorities’ capacity to inverse or control the process, through large-scale technical measures or political advocacy on the international scene. In a sense, the scientific discourse which is conveyed by the media seem not to have led (at least for the time being) to a conversion of local challenges into the global challenge of climate change, and to a pure externalisation of responsibilities and solutions: instead, potential manifestations of global climate change are considered indicative of internal imbalances and as showing the way to local improvement.