

## Ironies of globalisation: Observations from Fiji and Kiribati

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### ABSTRACT

*This article explores a number of ironies of globalisation that have transpired from observations of working with communities in Fiji and Kiribati. These ironies illustrate the nexus that exists between culture and globalisation in the Pacific region. The overarching message of this article is that major shifts are transpiring across the Pacific region under the currents and pressures of globalisation. These currents are often viewed as essential for countries within the region to modernise, but they also present serious challenges and can undermine culture and agency, particularly for women, as explored in the examples provided throughout this article. These examples – considered throughout as ironies – are drawn from participant observation and working with a number of communities in Fiji and Kiribati in 2011-2012. Together these ironies highlight the clashes that unravel when transnational forces impact on local communities throughout the region.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Development, Gender, Globalisation, Pacific

## INTRODUCTION

Broadly, globalisation can be thought of as the ways in which cultures influence one another (Arnett, 2002). In the last two decades particularly, western cultures, supported by the hegemony of capitalism and market growth, have been pervasively influencing the rest of the world. While the process of globalisation is taking place at a rapid speed, there is a mutual constitutive relation between the local and the global. The local and the global are constantly challenging or attempting to (re)define one another (Besnier, 2007). Geographical scales are increasingly being recognised as fluid and ever-changing, moving away from age old understandings of scale as fixed, nested hierarchies from the local to global (Sheppard, 2002). New understandings of geographical scale highlight the fluidity of contemporary social, economic and political changes. Prasad and Roy (2007) posit that the processes of globalisation and uneven rates of development have caused some fundamental shifts in the socio-economic status of many communities throughout the Pacific region. While globalisation may have been both resisted and engaged to varying degrees in various communities; today, the processes of globalisation are impacting social relations within Pacific families and communities more evasively (see Pawar, 2009; Westoby, 2010).

There are genuine tensions that arise between globalisation, culture and gender relations. Culture can be used to inhibit steps towards gender equality or it can be a vital tool for gender equality (Hooper, 2000). Likewise, globalisation can create opportunities for gender equality or undermine the agency of women and their participation in family and community decision-making. Consequently, both positive and negative gender relations are resulting at the local level from multiple impacts that often stem from the global system (Griffen, 2006). This article explores a number of examples to understand these tensions of how women are challenged physically, socially, economically and spiritually by global forces in these times of transition.

The authors spent two years living in Fiji (2011-2012) and worked on numerous development and climate change projects throughout the region in this time. Spending time in various communities throughout the region sparked an overriding concern about the clashes of globalisation and culture, and how such clashes are transpiring at the community level. This article is a collection of some of the stories *from the field* relating to these clashes and subsequent ironies. Working alongside communities on these larger development and climate change projects revealed a host of insights about globalisation, culture and gender relations, which are reported here. These examples each highlight the ironies implicit when cultural traditions and the pressures of transnational operations collide. They also highlight how globalisation is having far-reaching impacts across various and diverse communities in the Pacific. Such ironies point to a need to work with both women and men in the region to grapple with these issues in order to sustain healthy, equitable and sustainable livelihoods now and in the future.

## THE FOUR IRONIES

### *The shell market: Moving towards a cash economy but at a price*

Tourism is a major driver of economic growth and employment in Pacific Island Countries (Harrison & Prasad, 2013). Across Fiji, tourism plays a central role in the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) and employs a large number of people directly and indirectly. It is estimated that tourism contributed approximately 35% of Fiji's GDP in 2010 (Ministry of Tourism, 2012). Scholars have long described numerous positive economic and socio-cultural benefits of tourism across the Pacific region, largely touted as providing 'improved income and living standards for local people', as well as the revitalisation of 'local culture, especially traditional crafts and customs' (Engelhardt, 2000, p.177). Despite these documented benefits of tourism for popular Pacific destinations such as Fiji – often considered as the gateway to Pacific tourism – there are also a number of concerns and negative impacts that can unfold. For the Pacific, these can include the trivialisation of sacred traditions, demise of cultural traditions, and increased drug and alcohol use (Tuinabua, 2000), among other impacts.

For a small coastal village (Soso village) in the Yasawa group of islands in Fiji – a popular tourist destination region – a focus group discussion with a number of women from the village expressed how tourism operates in their community. This focus group discussion involved eight women from Soso village in December 2011. Soso village works closely with two nearby tourist resorts (the locally-owned Botaira Resort and foreign-owned Mantaray Island Resort), that provide employment to a number of community members. Local community members in Soso village are also involved in other activities for the resorts – they collect fresh fish, maintain a fowl house to supply eggs, tend to a number of pigs to provide fresh meat, supply labourers as necessary and offer regular cultural performances (known locally as *meke*). In addition, Soso village plays host to a village tour for tourists staying at the resorts. During these village tours the women of Soso village put on what is known locally as a *shell market* to sell their handicrafts to the tourists. Captain Cook Cruises also visits Soso village twice a week and again the women display a wide range of wares (including jewellery, gifts, souvenirs and sarongs) at the *shell market*, which follows a cultural performance by local community members.

In close discussion with these women from Soso village, during this focus group, they divulged how this *shell market* is an important source of income for their households, but there is a growing concern that it diverts precious time away from securing their household food needs. The women expressed that they traditionally gathered small fish and crustaceans from the shallows and now all their time is spent devoted to capturing the alluring tourist dollar. Women spend large amounts of time working at the resorts, or presenting their wares at the *shell market* while also trying to maintain their traditionally ascribed household duties. This finding echoes the work of Gibson (2013), who found that throughout resorts in the Yasawas, women often worked the longest hours while also doing the household chores and domestic jobs. What is interesting in these findings is that while women accepted this as a means to sustain their livelihoods there was genuine discontent that traditional cultural and subsistent practices of gathering food were being compromised.

Siwatibau (1997, p.35) points out that this increase in a cash economy might be an important way of 'achieving the necessary social gains', however, it can also be considered an irony. According to the women from Soso village, the irony relates to food security: women secure small amounts of money through tourism to purchase food (as well as other material aspirations) at the expense of having time to collect food from their local environment. This confirms Burt and Clerk's (1997, p.20) position that 'Pacific Islanders are well aware of the contradictions and trade-offs between short-term material benefits and long-term assurance of subsistence and social integrity, even if they do not always find it easy to choose between them'. The most striking part of this irony is the level of awareness of these women in Soso village about their perceived level of choices, and their continued path towards dependency on the cash economy.

*Tuna in a can and two-minute noodles: Changing diets and health implications*

Across Fijian households and communities, there has been a trend away from root crops, green leafy vegetables and fresh fish towards more fatty foods, flour-based food products, and rice and sugar (McGregor, 2003). While undertaking fieldwork for climate change adaptation projects with two village communities on Taveuni Island and one village community in the Yasawas (both in Fiji) in December 2011 and July 2012, focus group participants expressed a concern over the increasing reliance on the local store for their families' food needs. According to these local community members, the purchase of goods from the local store, which stocks canned and non-perishable goods, was not the only way of securing household food: plantations and fishing remained important sources. However, these community members expressed concern over the increasing rate of dependency on other external goods, which are in many cases nutritionally inferior. This is echoed in a briefing by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2013) on food security which discusses the challenges of the availability and accessibility of healthy and nutritious food, and the over-reliance on imported and processed foods. While these concerns were unanimous across focus group participants, it was a number of women who repeatedly, across all three communities, shared the irony of buying canned tuna (and two-minute noodles, as discussed below) from the local store as opposed to the traditional practice of going out to harvest fish from the local ocean stocks. The move to a cash economy in many rural communities in Fiji, and elsewhere in the Pacific, has seen an increase in consumptive purchases of foodstuff from the local store.

This is not a unique phenomenon in Fiji, but extends to communities from a variety of countries across the region (Pakoa et al., 2013). For example, Ali (2004) notes this trend towards an increasing dependency on food imports in Niue. Ali (2004) points to three simple reasons as to this increasing dependency: rising rates of urbanisation; greater opportunity for cash employment; and increasing interest in the export of agricultural and fisheries produce. This last point was confirmed during focus group discussions with numerous women in these three communities in Fiji. These women shared with the authors that fishing stock was beginning to decline as international fleets or local fleets harvest large numbers of fish for overseas markets.

The irony of purchasing canned tuna with the expanse of ocean resources in Fiji cannot be overlooked. Increasingly, men are being called upon to fish and dive for international markets

while nutrition levels of families continue to decline in these rural coastal communities (World Health Organization, 2010). For instance, sea cucumbers are being harvested at ever increasing rates, particularly for Chinese markets. A host of other marine resources are being overexploited in Fiji at a cost to sustaining livelihoods at a local-level (Pakoa et al., 2013). The transnational forces of the fisheries market cannot be understated in its role in driving food security towards a more commodified process. The consequence of such commodification means that cultural traditions of subsistent fishing are being undermined, making the nutritional and health impacts a cause for concern for local community members.

In focus group discussions across these three communities, many women also voiced their concerns about purchasing nutritionally poor food stocks such as two-minute noodles. They indicated that they have less time to prepare meals and so opt for quicker dishes such as two-minute noodles because of added pressures to contribute to the household income (through other activities such as working in resorts and participating in *shell markets*, as discussed above). As previously mentioned, Gibson (2013) confirms the pressure placed on women to work long hours while also trying to balance the needs of the household. According to Cameron (1997), being short on time translates into an increased reliance on the convenience of canned meat and fish, sugar, wheat flour and bread from the local shops stocking such goods. For decades, this concern about changes in diet in communities across the region and its cause for ill health have been documented by well-known scholars and writers such as Hau'ofa (1979) and Thaman (1983). As Cameron (1997, p.216) points out: 'The region has been going through a dietary and life-style revolution which has brought with it a number of health problems which resemble those of rich economies but often with greater intensity and significant local variations'. While the lower nutritional values of tinned and processed goods are a concern across the world, Cameron (1997) argues that Pacific communities are particularly vulnerable to diseases linked to diet. In any event, an irony exists, which has been identified by these women in the focus group discussions: with the expanse of ocean resources, a number of households are making less use of their surrounding local environment to meet their food and health needs.

#### *Fishing licences and prostitution: Should both be for sale?*

Kiribati is a small chain of atolls isolated by an expanse of ocean. The capital, Tarawa, is a hive of activity where over 50,000 people share an area of 15.6 square kilometres. Tarawa is a densely populated atoll that is close to double that of Auckland or Sydney (Republic of Kiribati, 2012). Tarawa's population density has resulted in overcrowding issues and associated problems such as water pollution, waste disposal issues and land degradation (Tisdell, 2002). Sustaining livelihoods in this capital city can be extremely difficult and almost everything, besides a few fruits, taro and fish are imported into the country. Utilising more traditional food sources is declining overall due to rapid urbanisation, population growth and increasing rural-urban migration resulting in a growing dependency on imported food (Thomas, 2002). Coupled with difficult living conditions is the issue of rapid population growth in the country, which continues to exacerbate social issues such as youth unemployment and underemployment (Tisdell, 2002).

The most prominent economic resource for Kiribati is its vast area of territorial fishing zones.



These fishing zones provide for the domestic fishing industry and some food security to i-Kiribati people. The fishing licences for these resource rich waters are an important source of revenue for the Government of Kiribati (Barclay & Cartwright, 2007). It is estimated that access fees for fishing in Kiribati waters account for up to 40-50 percent of Kiribati's revenue and 22 percent of its GDP (Government of Kiribati, 2003). According to President Tong, in a public lecture at the University of the South Pacific on 11 May 2011, the government even sees these licences as a means to enable the future migration of its people to other countries as a consequence of climate induced sea level rise.

While the authors were in the country for a large development research project in May 2012, they held informal chats with law enforcement officers in Tarawa who shared a disturbing trend taking place in the capital. Many fishing licences have been permitted to international fishing fleets. A disturbing part of the docking process in Tarawa involves a small number of i-Kiribati fathers 'transporting girls to foreign vessels for the purpose of prostitution' in exchange for cash or fish to supplement the family income (United States Department of State, 2013, p.1). Griffen (2006, p.18) confirms this by stating that 'young girls engaged in prostitution often go out to foreign fishing vessels with family support and their income is used by their families'. Crippling poverty, changing economic conditions and difficulties in securing work is creating new roles and responsibilities for women and young girls to provide financially for their families; at any cost.

The prostitution occurs both on and off shore. According to Martin (2005), after prolonged periods at sea and cashed up, foreign fishing vessel crew often come ashore to seek out prostitutes. According to a government report, supported by UNICEF, a group of young women (known locally as *te korekorea*) frequent the main wharf (Betio) providing sexual services to fishing crew in exchange for goods and cash (Government of Kiribati, 2005, p.56). The name given to this group of women itself illustrates the saturated client base from South Korean fishing vessels. With the complex and compounding challenges of unemployment and overpopulation in the capital (Barclay & Cartwright, 2007), the recruitment of young women into prostitution, both on and off shore, is a worrying trend. The resource of abundant fish stocks is indirectly resulting in the commodification of women and young girls in order for them to sustain their livelihoods (Bohane, 2006). This is an irony that cannot be overlooked. The impact of this on young women should not be understated, not to mention the risks of other social problems to evolve in Tarawa as a consequence.

#### *Husband's priorities: Choosing tobacco and alcohol over food*

Focus groups were conducted in May 2012 in five of the 14 villages on Abaiang Atoll, which is located in the Northern Kiribati Group about 60km from Tarawa. Abaiang Atoll is approximately 33km long and 9km wide with villages spread across one major atoll and two smaller islets. During focus group discussions with the women from these five villages about how households throughout these communities make a living more broadly, a worrying trend was exposed. During discussions that only involved women community members, they shared with the authors that men would often prioritise household money to purchase tobacco (known

locally as *Irish cake*) and alcohol. Most women expressed that they often did not have enough money to purchase necessary food stocks and school supplies for their children because their husbands would use the household cash to support their tobacco and/or alcohol habits. This trend is supported by a World Health Organization study that found the high prevalence of alcohol and tobacco use by men in Kiribati. In a 2002 study, it was found that 75.7 percent of i-Kiribati men smoke and 46.9 percent consumed alcohol (World Health Organization, 2009). These women on Abaiang Atoll expressed that the priority for these goods by their husbands has meant that their household struggles to meet its needs. One woman indicated that conflicts in the community predominately stem from a lack of food at the household level. In discussions, these women went on to indicate that if these habits were curbed, they would have enough money to support the food and education needs of their households.

Around the globe, numerous researchers have identified the pivotal role of gender in influencing differences in income (Olsen & Coppin, 2001), land inheritance (Estudillo et al., 2001), nutrition and health (Klasen, 1996), and educational opportunities (Kingdon, 2002). As such, gendered power relations can limit the enjoyment of a broad range of human rights, particularly for women and children. These include the right to safe and adequate food and water, the right to livelihoods and subsistence, and the right to effective participation in planning and decision-making even at the scale of the household.

This finding is consistent with work undertaken by Griffen (2006), who argues that men in Kiribati are seen as superior in both status and power and therefore exercise control over women in the family and community setting. This issue of utilising household funds on tobacco and/or alcohol was not something that could be easily discussed in the family setting. Nor were women able to exercise a (somewhat controversial) voice in the traditional meeting houses (known locally as *maneabas*), which are of special significance to communities culturally and historically and are sites for community meetings and discussions. This double edged sword can be seen as an irony in Kiribati where drugs trump sustenance in a globalising setting where woman struggle to raise the stakes of health and lifestyle needs for their families.

## CONCLUSION

These four ironies highlight the tensions of globalisation in the Pacific and point towards transnational processes that impact in particularly significant ways on women. In Fiji, tourism ventures have seen women move away from traditional food collection methods. Similarly, the commodification of foodstuff has seen a decline in traditional food consumption patterns. Both these examples highlight the ironies that exist between traditional and globalised food security processes and a trend towards the over-commodification of food. In Kiribati, the international fishing industry is giving rise to the commodification of women's bodies to sustain livelihoods. Furthermore, traditional male dominated power structures are leading to deprivations in food security and other needs, as men choose to expend income on global commodities such as alcohol and tobacco. In both cases, women's agency is being undermined throughout the ironies as a consequence of the increasing fluidity of the global-local. Together, these ironies highlight the tensions that exist in a transitioning Pacific environment where both women and men must grapple with a changing world – by both embracing some transitions and resisting others.

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