

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IN FIJI 2022–2023

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INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in cooperation with the International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI), research has been conducted amongst our Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) custodians and practitioners here in Fiji. COVID-19 impacted the whole world in many areas, devastating nations, governments, business houses/individuals and communities throughout the world and this research is focused on Fiji's intangible cultural heritage that was greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2022-2023. Through the research we were able to capture information from thirteen active practitioners in: Nadroga Navosa Sigatoka, Rewa, Vanua Levu, Suva and Tailevu. They were potters – 'tuli tuli', weavers of fans, baskets, mats, purses, masi makers/designers and salt makers – 'mahima'. Each practitioner had their own unique experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing both good and bad, during and after the pandemic. Many were adjusting and adapting to their current circumstances.

RESEARCH

A total of thirteen individuals and their communities have been researched and the interviews were conducted with:

- Ms Asena Dawai (potter) of Lawai village, Nadroga.
- Mr Sainivalati Nawawabalavu (potter) of Nakabuta Village, Nadroga.
- Ms Diana (salt maker) of Lomawai village, Nadroga.
- Ms Akesa Kunabuli (potter) of Nayawa Village, Nadroga.
- Ms Mareta Burese (voivoi weaver) of Nukubalvu village, Savusavu.
- Ms Mereilisoni (coconut leaves weaver) of Dreketi village, Savusavu.
- Ms Sanita Vu (masi maker & weaver) of Uduya village, Kabara, Lau.
- Ms Leba Duri (weaver – baskets, purses, salusalu) of Naikomo village, Kabara, Lau.

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- Ms Anaseini Latu (weaver – baskets, mats, purses) of the province of Ra, vasu Fulaga, Lau.
- Ms Rigieta Nuku (weaver – mats, wedding attire) of Tuvu village, Totoya, Lau.
- Ms Sereana Nagatalevu (weaver – mats, baskets, trays) of Naceva village, Beqa.
- Ms Solinavanua Raivotu (weaver – ‘*iri ni daku*’ traditional fan) of Daku village, Tailevu.
- Ms Veniana Maraia Paulina (Saqamoli traditional potter) of Naselai village, Nuku, Tailevu.

Information obtained during the interviews were not mainly based around their main ICH practices, also a source of their living, and questions were also focused and based on their communities, surroundings, nature, traditional practices, and expressions that they were accustomed to; which included performing their traditional *mekes*, dances, rituals, funeral rites, celebrations, social gatherings and their traditional practices – known to them as their ‘norm’. Adjusting to the ‘new norm’ – before, during and after the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, is something each of the thirteen individuals and their communities, expressed during this research.

SITUATION OF COVID-19 IN FIJI

The pandemic hit Fiji in an unexpected way, and no one was prepared or even knew what to expect. Medical authorities placed restrictions on movements and it was claimed that our first COVID-19 case was a flight attendant. Upon his return from the United States of America, this made everyone that arrived on international flights and through the seas a ‘high risk’ to those that were in the country. Quarantines, lockdowns, and the issuing of wearing a face mask, social distancing, constant hand sanitizing and being in your ‘bubble’ (nuclear or extended family) was a top priority when the pandemic first broke out.

The western division had many Fijians losing their full-time employments, they were mainly focused around the tourism sector, and this also stopped the flow of tourism into Fiji. Hundreds and thousands of flight attendants, pilots, hotel workers, shop attendants, business houses, governments officers lost their jobs, or worked on reduced hours, and many employees lost their homes, flats and this impacted their families as a whole. Most Fijians returned to their villages and had to live off the land and sea to provide for their daily needs and support their families. All schools were on total lockdown. Those who already living in the villages did not really feel the brunt of the pandemic, but all ICH practitioners that were dependent on the tourism sector experienced the decline in sales, orders and made no money at all during the pandemic. The pandemic brought about FEAR and ANXIETY to most of its people. With some sort of spiritual intervention to find comfort and solace during the pandemic, families bonded and

cared more for each other than ever.

Families communicated more online, and this also saw a shift to the digital era. Fiji's school system was not prepared for a pandemic and all lessons could not be accessed online.

Families all over Fiji exchanged and bartered their food, which was mainly done at the borders of the lockdown areas. Most urban and settlement families suffered during the pandemic due to a lack of food and the basic items needed. Most of our ICH practitioners experienced hardship during the pandemic, and some faced losses in their sales, orders, and the need for raw materials to make new products, not knowing how to utilize the digital spaces and the need to meet their basic daily needs, impacting their families and themselves. Some did not see the relevance of continuing the practice with all the hardship faced, but others saw their practice as an avenue to be therapeutic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Consent forms and questionnaires were prepared and presented to every informant. Their consent was important to get the proper answers needed for this research. For practitioners that were living in their rural communities, proper traditional protocols had to be observed and traditional '*sevusevu*' and presentations of *yaqona* had to be presented asking the permission to conduct interviews and what the research was all about and where this information will be stored and its purpose holistically. Informants also signed a consent form. A set of questionnaires were prepared, and each practitioner responded to it. All interviews were also digitally documented on camera and high-resolution pictures were also taken showing their ICH practice and products produced.

FINDINGS

Ms Asena Dawai (potter) of Lawai Village, Nadroga

Ms Dawai was interviewed at the Crow's Nest Resort in Sigatoka. She is part of her women's group of Lawai potters in Nadroga.

ICH element: knowledge of traditional pottery making, practice and skillsets and social practices.

Background and geographical information

Lawai village, in the district of Nadroga and Navosa Province (Western), is situated in the region of Sigatoka, in the Western division, some 61 miles or (98km) West of Suva, the country's capital. Lawai village town is Sigatoka town. The Lawai village and its people are renowned for their traditional clay potters. This unique practice has been passed down from generations to generations; they are also related to the nearby potters of Nakabuta village and Nayawa village; all have their own unique pottery skillsets and techniques for their unique big pots. Their

traditional potteries has been trademarked as ‘Naboumasi Pottery’. This design was made during their project with the UNDP – Mineral Department, post COVID-19 Recovery. This decision was made by the *mataqali* (clan) themselves – both men and women. The word ‘Naboumasi Masi Pottery’ is a word known only by the Mataqali of Lawai village. The people of Lawai village are well known for only creating this type of traditional pottery. They also make contemporary potteries to market to the nearby hotels, resorts, tourists and local markets.

Schedule management

The potters and salt makers of Nadroga, Sigatoka were all scheduled to be interviewed during my visit to Nadroga, Sigatoka. Asking for permission and observing the proper protocols (presenting my *sevusevu* – *yaqona* to the headman) in place to seek the approval to conduct my research was an area, that is highly respected for the *vanua* (community/village) and the communities/people to be interviewed. Ms Asena Dawai was selected to be interviewed as she was also representing her women folks of Lawai village, potters in Nadroga. She was interviewed during September 2022 in Nadroga, Sigatoka, Fiji. Ms Asena Dawai is a mother, married to a gentleman from Lawai village, Nadroga. The women married into their clans are given the permission to learn and create their potteries. She is also the bread winner for her family and has been practicing pottery making for more than twenty years now.

As an ICH practitioner, she is also a former committee member of the Lawai’s women potters and has assisted/supported her committee, the *vanua* and *lotu* (church) in pottery making, sales and financially.

Statistical information

During the pandemic, there were no recorded cases of COVID-19 in the village. Only the policemen, health workers and soldiers were allowed to work, everyone else was on lockdown. Most, not all the hotel workers in the villages (most of them were full-time hotel workers), lost their fulltime employment and were forced to stay home, or moved from Sigatoka town or the suburb’s back to the village. The Sigatoka area are well-known for its Sand Dunes, coastal resorts, hotels and backpackers for tourists – as it is sunny and dry in the area; just like Nadi.

The whole community have never experienced such a pandemic and this brought the whole community to their knees, families spent more time at home, family time, prayer time, there was no drinking of *yaqona* (*kava*), restrictions had to be observed because the authorities – police would do their spot checks. There was no sales or visits for the potters/artisans. All families had to live off their land/farms and whatever they could manage to feed and support their families. There was only one death during the pandemic. Even the proper burial rites/rituals could not be observed properly. Immediate and extended families could not even attend the funerals and bury the dead.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

When the pandemic first struck Fiji in Nadi (closer to Sigatoka); authorities gave the warning, and restrictions were put in place: no social gatherings, wearing of masks etc. Most of the villages went about their daily tasks and chores as her family and most of the families in Lawai village ate from their land (plantations). This was not easy for all families as some were dependent on their full-time employment. The women potters would have tourists/guests visit their villages for a live demonstration, being entertained by their 'meke' (dance), and in the end purchasing or donating to their women potters, who would display and sell their potteries in their community halls. During the pandemic, the prolonged days, weeks, months and year of the lockdowns, and with all the restrictions in place most but not all the women felt discouraged and felt abandoned for not being able to sell/market their existing potteries. This caused a lot of frustration, pressure and major discouragement to most of the women potters – old, middle-aged and young, Asena and the other women, began to think if it was worthwhile to making pottery and to keep the practice alive. The basic thought and experience of not being able to make any money from their potteries just brought on more pressure and frustration.

Mr Sainivalati Nawawabalavu (potter) of Nakabuta Village, Nadroga

Mr Nawawabalavu was interviewed at the Crow's Nest Resort in Sigatoka. He is part of the potter's group in Nakabuta, Nadroga.

Background and geographical information

Nakabuta village, in Nadroga and Navosa Province (Western), situated in the interior of Sigatoka town, about a 15-minute drive to reach the village, 60-minute (or 97km) west of Suva city, the country's capital. The history about the Nakabuta people is that their pottery first came from their neighboring village, Lawai village. The women folks says this is where their elders came from; pottery was actually brought by their ancestors; but folks of the village, the people are all related in some way or another. You will find their grandfathers, grandmothers, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and children, all related and sharing maternal or paternal links to Lawai village or vice versa to Nakabuta village in the Nadroga Navosa province. The people of Nakabuta are renowned for their traditional clay pottery, this unique practice has been passed down from generations to generations. They are also related to the nearby potters of Nayawa village, who all have their own unique pottery skillsets and techniques for their unique big pots. Their traditional potteries has been trademarked as 'Nakabuta Mosiadi' Pottery. This design was made during their project with the UNDP – Mineral Department, post COVID-19 Recovery. This decision was made by the *mataqali* themselves – both men and women. The word 'Nakabuta Mosiadi' Pottery is a word known only by the *mataqali* of Nakabuta village. The people of Nakabuta village are well known

for only creating this type of traditional pot. They also make contemporary potteries to the market nearby hotels, resorts, tourists, and local markets.

Schedule management

Mr Sanivalati was an ideal candidate to be interviewed as he was the only male potter of Nakabuta village, and had learnt his pottery skills from his mother, who had taught him from a very young age. Ever since then he has been practicing the art of pottery making and making a living for himself and his family. He was also representing the community/village of Nakabuta. He was interviewed straight after Ms Dawai. Mr Nawawabalavu now looks after his mother and does full-time pottery making as a living. He would also display and market his products at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes center. This is also a place where he would hold small pottery classes for the tourist groups that would visit. He has been practicing the art of pottery making for more than forty years now. As an ICH practitioner, he is also a former committee member of the Nakabuta community of potters. He has also assisted/supported his committee, the *vanua* (community) and *lotu* (church) in pottery making, sales and financially.

Statistical information

During the pandemic, there were no recorded cases of COVID-19 in the village. For the district of Nadroga, there are more than 60 potters, that are registered artisans of Fiji Arts Council. There are less than 100 people living in Nakabuta village, the community consists of men, women, youths and children, a tight knit community. There is no network to the internet/mobile connection. The village is situated at the bottom of a hilltop. Hence the difficulty in connecting to the internet/mobile connection. There are a few hotel workers and people who work in the nearby Sigatoka town. Most of them had lost their full-time employment during the pandemic, forcing individuals and communities to return to the village and live off the land/plantations. The whole community have never experienced a pandemic as such and this brought the whole community to their knees, families spent more time at home, family time, prayer time, that was no drinking of *yaqona* (*kava*), restrictions had to be observed, because the authorities – police would do their spot checks. There was no sales or visits for the potters/artisans.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Pottery making for the Nakabuta villagers is the main source of income for most of the women in their community. Pottery is the major tourist attraction for Nakabuta village, but during the pandemic there were restrictions in place and no one visited Nakabuta at all. This was not normal for the Nakabuta people and being cut off from all internet connections and mobile/phone communications, they had to rely on the authorities to bring the messages of what to do and what not to do, during the pandemic. Most of the villages went about their daily tasks and chores, eating and planting their own foods, bathing in the nearby rivers and

basically living off the land. Living off the land was nothing new for the people. During the pandemic, the prolonged days, weeks, months and years of the lockdowns and with all the restrictions in place Sanivalati and of all the women felt discouraged and felt abandoned for not being able to sell/market their existing potteries. This caused a lot of frustration, pressure and major discouragement to most of the women potters – old, middle-aged and young. The basic thought and experience of not being able to make any money from their potteries just brought on more pressure and frustration. After the pandemic, he was given the opportunity with the other women potters of Lawai, Nayawa and Nakabuta to display and sell their potteries at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes.

Ms Diana (traditional salt maker) of Lomawai Village, Nadroga

Ms Diana was interviewed in Lomawai village, Nadroga. She is a part of the women's group of traditional salt makers, Lomawai village.

Background and geographical information

History says that a woman from Vusama village, also in the district of Nadroga Navosa, married a man in Lomawai village, she was a member of the *mataqali* that were custodians of the salt makers; she brought with her the knowledge and skillsets of salt making; the villagers say that their *vu* (gods) were seen to have been digging the ponds and the history of the salt makers is that the women would be dressed in their grass skirts and topless and would dance around the ponds to attract the gods to fill up the ponds with salt water. Lomawai village is located roughly halfway between Nadi town and Sigatoka town on the coastal side of the Queens highway. It is a 35-minute (30.3km) drive via off the Queens highway. Vanua Nalolo consists of 6 villages. Lomawai village is also a part of the Vanua Nalolo, situated right beside the sea bed. This is where the salt ponds are located. There is a new concrete cooking house and an open house for tourists/guests to be seated. Connecting the cooking house is a long concrete footpath – less than 100m walkway to the current pond, that has the sea salt water available. By language, social organization and culture of the Lomawai villagers belong to the Vanua Nalolo, consisting of 6 villages, all 6 villages are the custodians and shareholders to their '*qoliqoli*' (fishing ground). Salt making practice was lost over two centuries and from many generations up until 1998. The World Wild Life Fund (WWF) and Fiji Arts Council tried to revive and brought back the traditional salt making skills and practices, bringing the women and community of Lomawai. Linguistically, the community speak the local Nadroga-Navosa dialect of the iTaukei Fijian language. The village is headed by a '*turaga ni koro*' (government appointed headman), which is Christian dominated and families are mostly patriarchal in structure. Communal agriculture, fishing, shellfish collection and raising livestock are the principal subsistence activities. The people of Vanua Nalolo in Lomawai village are renowned for their traditional salt making. This unique prac-

tice has been passed down from generations to generations. Their traditional salt packaging has been trademarked as: 'NA MAHIMA' (White Gold) Ni Lomawai, Sigatoka. This design was made during their project with the UNDP – Mineral Department, post COVID-19 Recovery. This decision was made by the *mataqali* themselves – both men and women. Their salt is marketed to the Sigatoka hospital, hotels and a few private business houses and local markets.

Schedule management

Still in the district of Nadroga Navosa, Ms Diana was interviewed in her Lomawai village. She was part of her women's group that have kept and practiced the tradition of salt making with her older sister. She would share her 'firsthand' experiences of the issues the women faced before during and after salt making. The women folks of Lomawai were the active artisans in traditional methods of cooking salt. Presented the traditional '*sevusevu*' protocols of *yaqona* to the '*turaga ni koro*' (headman), seeking permission to interview her was for this project. Welcomed and acknowledged for presenting our *sevusevu*, showing a sign of respect was done when entering a village/community, and given the permission to go ahead with the interview.

Statistical information

Diana stated that no one in the village contracted the COVID-19 disease. Villages were all put on lockdown. They were only allowed to tend to their plantations for their everyday subsistence living. Those who were dependent and reliant on having full-time employment in the tourism industry lost their full-time jobs, was depressing and had a real struggle for most of the families. Forcing families to return back to the village also being glad that they lived in the village and managed to at least feed and support their families with whatever they could till from their plantations and the nearby river. Being on lockdown was frustrating and depressing too at the same time. Most families had more family time, less *yaqona* consumption, more television time and family bonds grew stronger as families would pray and ask for protection over the 'unforeseen' disease that was spreading all throughout the country. Access to electricity and updates with the news was widely available to the community, even for the internet connectivity. The police would do their spot checks. There were no visitors to the sight and no orders or sales for salt.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic restricted the women and men folks from cooking their traditional salt due to all the restrictions in place – no gathering of people, social distancing and wearing of face masks etc. No one in the village, dared to fetch the sea water, and cook for 2-3 days. The COVID-19 pandemic experience was something new for the whole community. With the prolonged days, weeks, months and year of the lockdowns and with all the restrictions in place Diana and the women felt

greatly discouraged and felt abandoned for not being able to sell/market their existing salt. This caused a lot of frustration, pressure and major discouragement to most of the salt makers as they would all take turns in cooking salt – from each of the 6 villages/*mataqali*'s – old, middle-aged and young. The basic thought and experience of not being able to make any money from their traditional salt just brought on more pressure and frustration. After the pandemic, things gradually went back to normal.

Ms Akesa Kunabuli (potter) of Nayawa Village, Nadroga

Ms Akesa Kunabuli was interviewed in Nayawa village, Nadroga. She is the Nayawa Potters leader for the women's group, Nayawa village.

Background and geographical information

Nayawa village, in Nadroga and Navosa Province (Western), situated along the coast heading toward Sigatoka town, located about 61-minute (98 km) west of Suva, the country's capital town, about a 5-minute drive to reach Sigatoka town. The history about the Nayawa people is that their ancestors settled on their land thousands of years ago, and were renowned traditional potters as they are situated right by the sea side. And they are also along the same seaside of Fiji's Heritage Site – the 'Sigatoka Sand Dunes', where it is said to be, where the Lapita people settled, more than 25,000 years ago. For their trademark, the *mataqali* discussed the name and drawings (type of pottery) only known to be made by the people of Nayawa village, Nadroga Navosa. The word 'Madudu' is what the *mataqali* of Nayawa are known. This design was made during their project with the UNDP – Mineral Department, post COVID-19 Recovery. They also make contemporary potteries to market to the nearby hotels, resorts, tourists, and local markets. The community of Nayawa also host and showcase their village and clay potteries to the tourists.

Schedule management

While still in the vicinity of Nadroga Navosa, it was also ideal to interview Akesa. She was the President of her women's association at the time, and was also in the process to calling for a meeting with all the women folks of Nayawa, who were potters, to set up a new committee, register their new business, open a new bank account and apply for a new tax number to operate as a professional business for the 'Madudu Potters'. Akesa has a good command of English and her understanding the questions of the research made this interview easy. Before we began with the research, a *sevusevu* was presented to their *turaga ni koro*, upon receiving us, she acknowledged our 'sevusevu' and observing the proper protocols in place, when visiting an indigenous iTaukei village.

Statistical information

There were no recorded cases of COVID-19 disease, during the pandemic for Nayawa village; most of the villagers stayed in their own households during the devastating pandemic. Most families lived off their farms/plantations and fished for their own livelihoods. Many families were full-time employed by the tourism sector; most, not all had lost their full-time employments; forcing bread winners to come back to the village, and support their own families from whatever was yielded from their farms/plantations and fishing. The potters carried on their pottery making, some found it more therapeutic and calming during the height of the pandemic. Whereas for others just found it hopeless to continue with their pottery making. Being on lockdown was frustrating and depressing too at the same time. Most families had more family time, less *yaqona* consumption, more television time and family bonds grew stronger as families would pray and ask for protection over the 'unforeseen' disease that was spreading all throughout the country. Access to electricity and updates with the news was widely available to the community, even for the internet connectivity. The police would do their spot checks. There were no visitors to the sight and no orders or sales for pottery at all.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Their pottery making practice was greatly impacted during the pandemic. The women would sit together in groups, source their clay from a particular place around the village. They would then mix the different types of clays together, dyeing and then kneading them into the different types of traditional and contemporary potteries. Everything was brought to a complete halt. For pottery making, sales and tourists visiting the village in groups for tours watch their displays and purchase their pottery. The COVID-19 pandemic experience was something new for the whole community. With the prolonged days, weeks, months and years of the lockdowns and with all the restrictions in place; Akesa and of the women felt greatly discouraged and felt abandoned for not being able to sell/market their existing potteries, this caused a lot of frustration, pressure and major discouragement to most of the pottery makers. After the pandemic, things gradually went back to normal.

Ms Mareta Bureta (voivoi weaver) of Nukubalavu Village, Savusavu

Ms Mareta (Figure 1) was interviewed in Yaroi village, Savusavu. She is a weaver from Nukubalavu village, Savusavu in Vanua Levu.

Background and geographical information

Nukubalavu village is located on Vanua Levu, the second largest island in Fiji. With a population of 300, the village holds the title of Tui Na Savusavu, this being the highest title in the land of Savusavu. It is about a 5 to 10-minute drive

to Savusavu town. Nukubalavu village are well known for its long stretching, white sandy beaches, attracting tourists, who are keen to visit and also take village tours. The local dialect spoken in Nukubalavu village are of the indigenous province of Cakaudrove. Most families are Christians, and most of the population are working full-time in the tourism sector. Other family members are still traditional mat, basket and contemporary weavers.

Schedule management

Mareta was the first to be interviewed in Savusavu, and she runs her small business as a full-time handicraft vendor at the Savusavu Handicraft Market in Savusavu.

I had scheduled her interview during the day, as it would be an ideal time to meet up with Mareta. I was informed of her weaving skillsets, through her niece Rosa, who had taught her weaving at an early age.

Statistical information

During the pandemic, there were no known cases reported or recorded with COVID-19. This gave the community of Nukubalavu village a sense of comfort and ease. Most families stayed within their own homes and took care of their own families, adhering to the restrictions in place. Being on lockdown was frustrating and depressing too at the same time. Most families had more family time, less *yaqona* consumption, more television time and family bonds grew stronger as families would pray and ask for protection over the 'unforeseen' disease that was spreading all throughout the country. Access to electricity and updates with the news was widely available to the community, even for the internet connectivity. The police would do their spot checks. There were no visitors to the sight and no orders or sales for pottery at all.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Mareta kept weaving inside her own home, same as for the other women folks, the only hinderance was there were not many orders, buyers or sales during the pandemic. She could not go and market her mats at the Savusavu Handicraft due to lockdowns and the restrictions of no social gatherings at all. Despite all the restrictions, she kept weaving all throughout the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic experience was something new for the whole community. But, during the interview, I could see that being in Savusavu away from the Viti Levu (mainland), the people still went about their normal days with only a few restrictions in place – mainly in the town area.



Figure 1. Ms Mareta Bureta, *voivoi* weaver of Nukubalavu village, Savusavu. (Photo: E. Edwards)

Ms Mereilisoni (coconut leaves weaver) of Dreketi Village, Savusavu

Ms Mereilisoni (Figure 2) was interviewed in Yaroi village, Savusavu. She is a weaver from Dreketi village, Savusavu in Vanua Levu.

Background and geographical information

Dreketi was once an independent state in the province of Macuata, Vanua Levu, Fiji. There is more than one denomination in the tikina (district) now, the ancestors of the Dreketi tikina people practiced cannibalism widely, while the rest of Fiji had accepted Christianity and became educated in the ways of the Western world. Dreketi village is located in the province of Macuata, Vanua Levu, the second largest island in Fiji. To travel from Dreket to Savusavu town would take about 31-minute (27.3km) via the Kings Road. The local dialect spoken in Dreketi village are of the indigenous province of Macuata. Most families are Christians and most of the population are working full-time in the tourism sector. Other family members are still traditional basket, mat and basket weavers.

Schedule management

Mereilisoni was the second lady to be interviewed in Savusavu, and she had to travel from her village (interior) to get Savusavu. She brought her own coconut leaves, to demonstrate how she weaves baskets (Nai Lalalakai). Her interview was scheduled during the day too, as it would be the best time to digitally record her demonstration.

Statistical information

During the pandemic, there were no known cases reported or recorded with COVID-19 in her village, Dreketi. This gave the community of Dreketi village a sense of comfort and ease. Most families stayed within their own homes and took care of their own families, adhering to the restrictions in place. They were reliant on their farms/plantations and the sea to source their daily meals. Individuals and families would wear their face masks when going to the plantations and out to sea. Access to electricity and updates with the news was widely available to the community, even for the internet connectivity. The police would do their spot checks.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Mereilisoni kept weaving inside her own home as for the other women folks, the only hinderance was there were not any orders for her baskets from the nearby hotels. Despite all the restrictions, she kept weaving all throughout the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic experience was something new for the whole community. But, during the interview, I could see that being in Savusavu away from the mainland, the people still went about their normal days with only a few restrictions in place – mainly in the town area.



Figure 2. Ms Mereilisoni (kato drika food basket weaver), Dreketi village, Savusavu. (Photo: E. Elizabeth)

Ms Sanita Vu (*masi* maker & weaver) of Uduya Village, Kabara, Lau

Ms Sanita Vu was interviewed in her handicraft stall at the Curio Handicraft Market in Suva, Fiji. She now resides in a suburb in Suva.

Background and geographical information

Kabara is a part of the Lau archipelago group, with a land area of 31 km² (12 sq mi), its population of some 700 lives in four villages. The people of Kabara, Lau are renowned for their craftmanship in the area of wood carving. The *vesi* wood (*Instia bijuga*) is a native plant of Kabara, this is the traditional material for the wood carvers and the best to be used. Due to deforestation this has stripped the island bare, leaving only 8 percent of the island covered with *vesi* trees. *Vesi* trees take up to 70-80 years to mature. *Yasi* trees (Sandalwood), now being used as an alternative. *Yasi*, takes only 30-40 years to mature.

Kabara Island (Fiji)

The women and men of Kabara, Lau are known to be distinguished weavers, *masi* makers, wood carvers, canoe builders and more. The local dialect spoken in Kabara village are of the indigenous province of Lau. Christian Missionaries, first arrived in Tobou, Lakeba, Lau, and then to all parts of the Lauan group. Most families are Christians, and some of the extended families now live in capital of Suva, Fiji, moving to the cities looking for better opportunities for themselves and their children. Just like Sanita, she is now residing in an urban suburb in Suva, and runs her business from home and at the Suva Curio Handicraft Centre.

Schedule management

Sanita was interviewed at her handicraft stall. It was an ideal location too, because she had her own space and a display of all her products in her stall. I had scheduled her interview during the day too, as it would be the best time to take high resolution pictures of her and her *masi* (mulberry cloth like material).

Statistical information

There were no recorded cases of COVID-19 in her household, but only for the greater suburbs in Suva. Statistics² shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. Sanita states that during the pandemic in Suva, Fiji, things were intense for her and the family, hearing of increasing cases of COVID daily, gave her and family caution to be careful, wearing masks, hand sanitizing, social distancing and more. She was a supplier of baskets and small pieces to 'Jacks of Fiji' (retail shop) – they would drop rations and food supplies to her family, and her family would live on whatever they would manage to get from their little garden. Being on lockdown was frustrating and depressing too at the

² Worldometers. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/fiji/#graph-deaths-daily>

same time. This was not normal for Sanita, she was used to making orders receiving orders on a weekly, fortnightly basis. Living in an urban suburb was scarier, as the increase of COVID-19 cases; and the fear of contracting the disease was paramount for her family. They would spend more time in devotion (prayer) – seeking protection from God. Her family would only have one meal a day; so they could have enough food to sustain themselves.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Sanita kept making her *masi*, weaving and creating all that she could during the lockdown. But once her raw materials were exhausted, she had to stop making her products, the *voivoi* (pandanus leaves) and *masi*, mainly supplied by those living on Lau Island, and those sold in the markets, but due to the pandemic; everything came to a standstill.

Ms Leba Duri (weaver – baskets, purses, salusalu) of Naikomo Village, Kabara, Lau

Ms Leba Duri was interviewed in her handicraft stall at the Curio Handicraft Market in Suva, Fiji. She now resides in suburb in Suva, Fiji

Background and geographical information

Kabara is a part of the Lau archipelago group, with a land area of 31 km² (12 sq mi), its population of some 700 lives in four villages. The people of Kabara, Lau are renowned for their craftsmanship in the area of wood carving. The *vesi* wood (*Instia bijuga*) is a native plant of Kabara, this is the traditional material for the wood carvers and the best to be used. Due to deforestation this has stripped the island bare, leaving only 8 percent of the island covered with *vesi* trees. *Vesi* trees take up to 70-80 years to mature. *Yasi* trees (Sandalwood), now being used as an alternative. *Yasi*, takes only 30-40 years to mature.

Schedule management

Leba was interviewed at her handicraft stall in Suva city, she also wanted to show her display of products made from her ICH practice. Interviewing her in the morning was best, for taking high resolution pictures, especially with all her unique products on display.

Statistical information

There were no recorded cases of COVID-19 in her household; but only for the greater suburbs in Suva; Statistics³ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. Leba was in Lautoka city, in the western division of Fiji, during the pandemic. She stated it was the scariest time of her life, one

³ Ibid

that she never imagined.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Leba is a traditional and contemporary weaver, inherited from her mother, grandmother and ancestors from Kabara, Lau. When the pandemic broke out in Lautoka city, she also had a handicraft store in the market, had to close her business, but continued her weaving practice at home. However, she could only go as far as whatever materials were available. There was a shortage of raw materials of – *voivoi*, *masi* and *paogo* (sago) from the outer islands, this chain of supply was cut-off altogether.

Ms Anaseini Latu (weaver – baskets, mats, purses) of the Province of Ra, Vasu Fulaga, Lau

Ms Anaseini Latu was interviewed at her residence in Vatuwaqa, Suva, Fiji.

Background and geographical information

Anaseini Latu resides in Vatuwaqa (urban suburb), Suva, Fiji. Vatuwaqa to Suva city is about 4km and it takes about 10-minute by road. Vatuwaqa is also known to be an industrial area, and the area is filled with private residents and also public housing. Anaseini resides in a public housing. The suburb has more than 1,000 affordable residential homes, more than 50 housing units and 100 plus squatters in the area. Anaseini is from the province of Ra and shares maternal links to Fulaga, Lau. She is married and has no children. Residing with her is her nephew, his wife and their two small children. She has been residing in Vatuwaqa in most of her life. She is now in her 50's.

Schedule management

Anaseini was interviewed in her home as this is also where she operates her small business.

Interviewing her in the morning was best, for taking high resolution pictures, especially with all her unique products on display.

Statistical information

There were a few recorded cases of COVID-19 in her suburb and in the greater Suva area. Statistics⁴ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. Anaseini and her extended family stayed home during the whole pandemic. She also mentioned that it was the scariest time of her life, one that she never imagined or would not want to go through again.

⁴ Ibid

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Anaseini's weaving was impacted during the pandemic. Stopping all her sales and the supply of her works to her ready-made clients, orders had to be cancelled and this caused so much delay and set-backs for her family. Living in the city and not having a big backyard plantation or garden to grow her own root crops or vegetables, brought a lot of pressure and frustration to her and the family.

Anaseini is a traditional and contemporary weaver, inherited from her maternal links - mother, grandmother and ancestors from Fulaga, Lau.

Ms Rigieta Nuku (weaver – mats, wedding attire) of Tuvu Village, Totoya, Lau

Ms Rigieta Nuku was interviewed in Valelevu, Suva, Fiji.

Background and geographical information

Ms Rigieta Nuku resides in Valelevu, (urban suburb), Nasinu, Fiji. Nasinu to Suva city is about 10km and it takes about 20-minute by road. Nasinu was formally designated a 'Town', despite having a population larger than Suva city, the capital of Fiji (92,043 as the 2017 Census). It is one of Fiji's fastest-growing towns. Its land area is the largest of any municipal area in Fiji, and more than twice that of Suva. It is a major residential hub in Fiji, housing a large majority of the work force in Nasinu itself and in the Fijian capital, Suva. The Nasinu property market has experienced significant growth over the last several years, leading to substantial increases in property value.

Schedule management

Rigieta was interviewed in Nasinu, where she was had a tent setup, and was a vendor for the Nasinu Festival. She was interviewed during the day.

Statistical information

There were a few recorded cases of COVID-19 in her suburb and in the greater Suva area; Statistics⁵ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. Rigieta and her family stayed home during the entire pandemic and managed to get through it, without so much pressure. She still cannot believe that she and her family went through a pandemic.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

Rigieta is a traditional and contemporary weaver, she had inherited her ICH practice as a weaver from her mother and grandmother. As the sole bread winner of her family and through her ICH practice, she has managed to educate her adult daughters. Her weaving was impacted through the cancellation of orders and

⁵ Ibid

buyers not being able to reach her to purchase her mats and wedding attire – *masi* or *voivoi* designed, also hindering their livelihood and finances. But she says they managed to get by during the pandemic.

Ms Sereana Nagatalevu (weaver – mats, baskets, trays) of Naceva Village, Beqa Island

Ms Sereana Nagatalevu was interviewed in Suva, Fiji.

Background and geographical information

Ms Sereana Nagatalevu lives on the island of Naceva village, Beqa. Beqa is an island in Fiji, an outlier to the main island of Viti Levu, 10 kilometres (6.2 miles) to the south. The island has a land area of 36 square kilometres (14 square miles) and reaches a maximum elevation of 462 metres (1,516 feet). Beqa has 9 villages broken into 2 Tikinas or Districts: Sawau and Raviravi.

The villages of Dakuibeqa (the chiefly village of the Sawau people), Dakuni, Soliyaga, Naceva and Naseuseu are a part of the Tikina (District) of Sawau. The villages of Nawaisomo, Raviravi, Lalati and Rukua are a part of the Tikina (District) of Raviravi. Tradition of the 9 villages on the island, Dakuibeqa Dakuni, Soliyaga, Naceva and Rukua are noted for the tradition of firewalking. Firewalking is an ICH practiced and passed down from generations to generations, and is only practiced by these *mataqali*'s. There are over 3,000 inhabitants of the six villages, with 4 Resorts on the island, and their main source of income is tourism. Uniquely, tomatoes can be grown on the island all year round.

Schedule management

Sereana was in Suva city, visiting her oldest daughter, who is chef, and this was an excellent time to interview her. She was interviewed in a restaurant in Suva city.

Statistical information

Sereana is also the President for the Soqosoqo Vakamarama's group (women's group). The group consists of more than 30 women in her village. During the pandemic on Beqa Island, there were no confirmed cases of COVID-19. Statistics for the whole of Fiji⁶ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. All families stayed in their own homes during the pandemic on the island of Beqa.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The women in her group are mostly made up of traditional mat weavers, they all work in groups. Each group is tasked to weave a set of mats and this is rotated all

⁶ Ibid

throughout the year. The pandemic restricted the young women, mothers and grandmothers from gathering and weaving together in their groups. Selling these mats would also assist their families in educating their children, buying groceries from the stores, contributing to the *vanua* and the *lotu*. This was all hindered during the pandemic.

Ms Solinavanua Raivotu (weaver – ‘*iri ni daku*’ traditional fan) of Daku Village, Tailevu

Ms Solinavanua Raivotu was interviewed in Daku village, Tailevu, Fiji.

Background and geographical information

Daku Village, Tailevu, is famous for *Iri ni Daku* (woven fans). One of the unique attractions you will find in Nausori and the province of Tailevu is the *Iri (fans) ni Daku*. Daku is a village that is located about 15 minutes outside of Nausori town and the Daku village women are known for weaving these unique fans. As an age-old tradition, it is said that the skills of making a *Daku* fan is not given easily to any woman who is not from Daku Village. The fans belong to the *Vunivalu* of Bau, and in the olden days photos of the *Vunivalu*⁷ were usually taken with him holding a fan from the village of Daku. The fan is usually what the people of Daku take with them when paying tribute to Bau. The *Vunivalu* of Bau (paramount chief) gave permission to the women to sell/market their woven fans. The only restriction was that all fans must only be woven in Daku village and not outside of the village.

Schedule management

Ms Solinavanua was interviewed in her village in Daku. Before the interview, the traditional protocols of a *sevusevu* were observed, once this was presented to the *turaga ni koro*. Being given the permission, she was interviewed.

Statistical information

During the pandemic there were no cases recorded in Daku village. Statistics for the whole of Fiji⁸ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. All families stayed in their own homes during the pandemic on the island of Beqa.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The women kept weaving their fans and the availability of the coconut leaves is in abundance, but they could not sell/market their fans at all; this was due to the

⁷ Facebook page of Visit Nausori. <https://www.facebook.com/VisitNausori/photos/a.116821143362125/331736068537297/?type=3>

⁸ Worldometers, op. cit.

restrictions in place.

Ms Veniana Maraia Paulina (Saqamoli traditional potter) of Naselai Village, Nuku, Tailevu

Ms Veniana Maraia Paulina (Figure 3) was interviewed in Naselai village, Nuku, Tailevu, Fiji.

Background and geographical information

Ms Veniana Paulina lives in Naselai village, Tailevu. The village is famous for the 'saqamoli' potters (water vessel only made for the *Roko Tui Dreket* – Rewa chief). The saqamoli is also designed on Fiji's one dollar coin. It takes about 17-minute, 10km to travel by boat to the Nasalai jetty, where you will need to ride a water taxi, then catch a car/bus to get to the nearest Nausori Town. There are less than one hundred people living in Naselai village, Tailevu, they live in their nuclear and extended families. Veniana's *mataqali* are known to be the saqamoli potters for *Roko Tui Dreketi*. The Naselai village community speak in the indigenous Fijian Bauan language. And most families are Christians.

Schedule management

Veniana often stays home in her village, and practice pottery making daily. Traditional protocols had to be observed by presenting a 'sevusevu' before conducting the interview in Naselai village, Tailevu. She was interviewed in her home.

Statistical information

With less than 100 people living in the village, there were no known cases of COVID-19 during the pandemic. Statistics for the whole of Fiji⁹ shows as follows: Coronavirus cases: 68,898; Deaths: 883; Recovered: 67,006. Most families stayed in their own homes during the lockdown.

Target ICH was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic

The practice of pottery was impacted during the pandemic, Veniana had a few clays already mixed; she kept creating her potteries but could only go as far as the availability of the clay. She would have assistance from her younger nieces to source the clay from the nearby river or around the village. The sales of her pottery are the main source of her income. She lives and looks after herself.

⁹ Ibid



Figure 3. Ms Veniana Paulina (Saqamoli potter) of Naselai village, Nuku, Tailevu. (Photo: E. Edwards)

DISCUSSION

ICH practitioners should be encouraged to market their products online; we are now moving into the digital space, and this is an avenue that needs to be explored. They will be able to market their products internationally. ICH practitioners need to also be digitally documented as some are 'Living Human Treasures' (LHT) and this knowledge and practice must be passed onto the next generation of peoples. To bridge the gap between the older and younger generation – content: like videos (LHT, demonstrations), animation (cartoons, drawings) and online shopping portals need to be developed to educate, create awareness, promote, market our ICH practitioners and their products. Each indigenous, traditional custodian and practitioner have their own unique NICHE to promote, advertise and market – locally, regionally, and internationally. If they can earn a steady income all year round, this will also encourage the younger generation to take up their own ICH practice.

CONCLUSION

From 2022 to February 2023, I have been documenting all thirteen ICH practitioners, all throughout Fiji: in Nadroga, Sigatoka; Rewa, Vanua Levu, Suva, and Tailevu. Each practitioner shared the impacts of COVID-19 on their communities, individual business and on themselves. This report covers the background, geographical information, schedule management, statistical information, and the impacts of ICH during the pandemic. The transition of change after the pandemic, the impacts of COVID-19 on the transmission of their ICH were the use of online technology, the participation of the younger and upcoming generation, the relationship regarding ICH and its stakeholders and the related policies

and support for ICH. All of these questions had to be translated into the indigenous Fijian vernacular - verbally; whilst interviewing the practitioners, once they understood what the questions were, they were able to give their detailed answers and this also came with emotions and tears, in being able to articulate the situation and experiences, as it varied.

With most of thirteen practitioners there was no struggle to the loss and practice of ICH as all have been born into the heritage of a traditional salt (*mahima*) maker, '*tuli tuli*' – potter, '*iri ni daku*' – fan weaver, *masi* maker/prints, mat, basket, purse weaver etc. It is part of their everyday lifestyle and practice. Some of our practitioners are finding it a struggle to engage the younger generations into their ICH practice, with the change in time; it is evident to see that more youths and even those that are younger are into the use of smart phones and online technology. An excellent way to engage our youths of today is to allow them to document their own families in the making and production of their unique ICH's and share their stories online.

With the increase in prices of the raw materials, it would be the best for all communities to start planting their own, harvest and produce their own products. Some of the communities in this research are doing well, with no lack or shortage of raw materials. The farmers and business houses here in Fiji have taken advantage of the pandemic and scaled the prices up, increasing the costs of both, *masi*, *paogo* and *voivoi* raw materials, making it difficult for practitioners to purchase and increase their production.

Practitioners, most of whom have been 'old schooled' – are not that too tech-savvy, navigating their way around a smart phone, using new apps and camera, can be of 'culture shock' to them. Most will ask for the assistance of their children, nieces, nephews and even grandchildren to take pictures of their products and have this uploaded onto the different social media platforms for their clients/customers to see, and then eventually place their orders and purchase. Whereas for some are still used to the 'old fashioned' way of doing things, maybe not so much seeing the relevance or having their products plagiarized online.

Whereas the transmission of knowledge and their practices of ICH to their families and communities is encouraging to know that all are doing their best with their communities, trying to engage their men, women, youths, and children is to participate in their ICH practices. It is promising to know that the future generations will continue their ICH practices, apart from Ms Veniana of Naselai village in Nuku, Tailevu. Her community needs to have more revitalizations and preservations for their ICH practice in '*Tuli Tuli*' – pottery making, these are the creators of the '*Saqamoli*' (water vessels).

The participation of youths and the younger generations is of vital importance – as they are the 'future' of tomorrow and they will also continue the practice passed down by our ancestors. If this is lost, then we will have a whole generation of people not knowing their ancestry links, traditional knowledge, and its practices. We need to have more of our own youths and the younger generations

engaged in the making of their own ICH's and our master weavers, *masi* makers/prints, potters and salt makers teaching and transmitting their knowledge and skillsets to the younger generations. There is even a wider gap on the transmission of knowledge on the indicators in nature before a cyclone.

Relationships with ICH stakeholders after the pandemic have strengthened and there seems to be more engagement. Through the experience from the lockdowns, people have come to value and appreciate the purpose of meeting in person and having face-face workshops, *talanoa* sessions (meetings), market days and even mini exhibitions. Stakeholders have also become aware of the need to have 'open and accessible' markets, portals online for all practitioners and their products. During the lockdowns, most people went online. This was seen to put all their products online and have an 'online shopping' store, e.g., 'Shopify' (ecommerce platform for online stores). The Fiji Arts Council is in the process of offering its traditional and contemporary custodians; the option of having their products sold via 'Shopify'. This should be up and running by the middle of this year.

Having the proper polices and legislations in place to support our ICH practitioners, for the protection of their trademarks and their business, is important. This is an area where more awareness needs to take place; there seems to be a lack of understanding from individuals and the communities on how best to have a trademark is and the benefits it will have on their products, business, communities, and future.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic was an event which was never envisioned by our ICH practitioners. This has seen the push in a new direction of using the online digital platforms/spaces, to create content on ICH and even market their products. This would be beneficial to their own safeguarding, preservation, revitalization, and marketing of their products internationally.