

Changing patterns in household membership, changing economic activities and roles of men and women in Matokana Village, Onoilau, Fiji

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Introduction

The Ono-i-Lau group of islands is located in the southern section of the Lau archipelago in the east of Fiji at 20° 40' S and 178° 44' W (Figure 1).

The lagoons, coral reefs and islands of the Ono-i-Lau group of islands are shown in Figure 2.

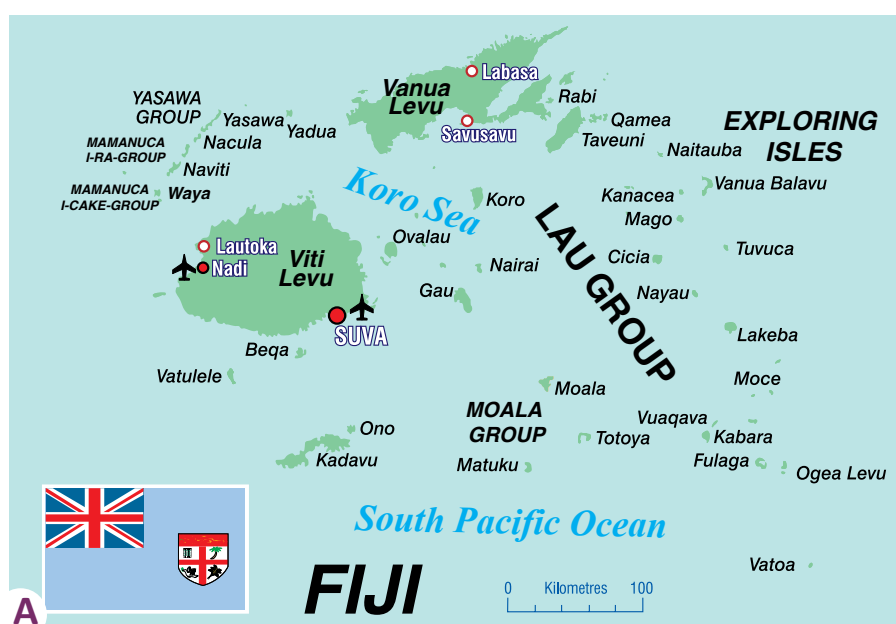
There are over one hundred islands in the Ono-i-Lau group, covering a total land area of 7.9 km² within a reef system of 80 km² (Ferry and Lewis 1993; Vuki et al. 1992). The two main islands – Onolevu and Doi – are inhabited. The three villages of Nukuni, Lovoni and Matokana are located on Onolevu Island, while Doi village is located on Doi Island.

The islands of Onolevu, Doi and Davura are volcanic in origin and are part of the rim of a breached crater. Onolevu Island is the principal island. It is an elbow-shaped island with two hills.

Tuvanaicolo and Tuvanaira Islands are located a few kilometres away from the islands of Onolevu but are also part of the Ono-i-Lau group. Vuataono, a reef lagoon, is located between Onolevu Island and the two Tuvana islands.

Matokana Village is located on the western side of Onolevu Island near the airstrip. Figure 3 shows the Google earth satellite map of the current village and the village boundaries. The houses can be clearly seen in this map.

This study was undertaken in Matokana village on the island of Onoilau in November of 2014. The survey was funded by the UNDP GEF Small Grants Program as part of a wider project on enhancing food security and environment conservation. The wider study covered socio-economic studies, food consumption, food security, marine conservation, gender empowerment and water usage and management. This survey was conducted by the author with the help of Vuli Mekemeke and Pauliasi Luvu as research assistants from Matokana village.



A



B

A • Map of Fiji showing the location of Ono-i-Lau

B • Satellite map of Ono-i-Lau group of islands showing the main island of Onolevu where the airstrip is located and Doi Island, the second largest island in the group

C • Satellite map of Matokana Village in Ono-i-Lau



C

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Changing patterns in household membership

The population of Matokana village has declined over the years. In 1982, 166 people were recorded and in 2002 there were 103 (Kuster et. al. 2005). In the survey carried out in November 2014, the household data indicate that it had 29 households with a population of 99 people (this study).

The age of males and females living in Matokana Village in November 2014 ranged from 1 to 74 years for males and 3 to 85 years for females. In two households, a 78 and a 76 year-old female were living on their own.

The mean number of people per household decreased from 6.6 people in 1982 to 5.3 people in 2002 within a period of 20 years. It decreased even further to three people per household in 2014, over a decade later. Figures 4 and 5 show the age categories of males and females respectively living in Matokana Village during the November 2014 survey.

The two age distribution plots show some distinctive trends, such as the low count of males between 11 to 30 years compared to that of females. There is also a higher count of females aged 41 to 75 than of males.

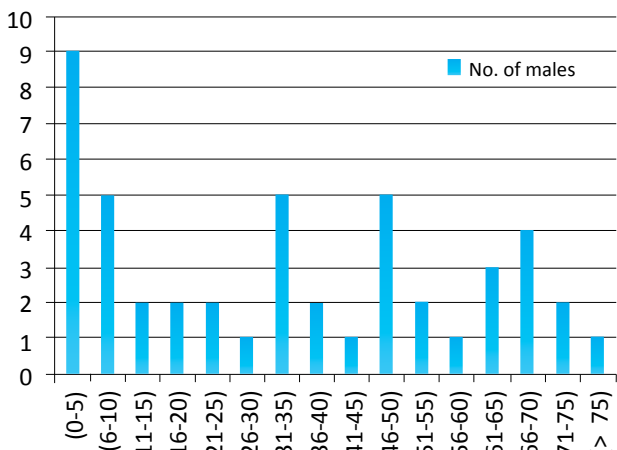


Figure 4. Age groups of males living in Matokana Village in 2014.

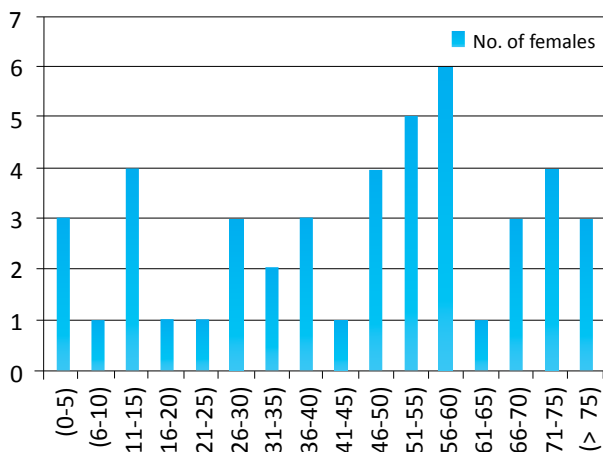


Figure 5. Age groups of females living in Matokana Village in 2014.

Historical changes of sources of income

From the 1930s to the 1990s, the traditional regular source of cash income in Matokana village was from copra. Men, women and children collected coconuts during the week and then cut the copra once a week. Both men and women were involved in cutting copra (Vuki et. al. 1992). Money obtained from cutting copra was used to purchase sugar, tea, canned food and similar items from the only village co-operative store.

Seaweed became a major source of income for the islanders in 1998. A rural development programme started in 1998 developed community-based seaweed farming in Ono-i-Lau and many other parts of Fiji. This provided an important economic base for the island and a renewed interest in marine resources and their conservation. Families were actively involved in planting seaweed and selling it to the Fiji Department of Fisheries or its agents. The seaweed planting incentive for the villagers included the provision of a wooden boat with an outboard motor provided by the Fiji Department of Fisheries after harvesting a certain amount of dried seaweed.

By 2014, there was no seaweed being planted by the Matokana villagers nor was there any copra production. There are several reasons for the lack of participation in the copra industry, an activity that was a traditional source of income in the past. Among the many reasons is the fall in the copra market price, which made the making and selling *magimagi* (sinnet) to the urban markets more lucrative than cutting copra. The seaweed farming ceased in Matokana village because of damage and loss of crops during cyclone seasons and also because of marketing problems with seaweed in Fiji (Lal and Vuki, 2010).

The other reason is that there is no longer a village cooperative store to buy copra and sell it to urban markets. There were two village stores in the past; the whole village of Matokana owned one, a cooperative store, and the



Figure 6. *Magimagi* (sinnet) ready to be shipped to urban markets

other was also a cooperative store but belonged to a single *mataqali* (clan), Naceva. Both cooperative stores were closed because of financial mismanagement.

Because of the closure of the cooperative stores, copra production almost ceased in Matokana village. Some families were still producing copra in 2014 but had to sell it to the Doi village cooperative store on a neighbouring island, and copra had to be transported by boat. By 2014, three stores were operating, all owned and run by individual families in the village. Women owned two of these stores. None of them bought or sold copra because the copra business is very demanding in labour for handling, drying, general processing and storage.

One of the lucrative products being sold from 2008 to 2013 was sandalwood. The Ono Development Committee (ODC) formed by the urban dwellers who are Onoilau relatives, bought sandalwood from the villagers and then sold it to urban markets. Individual families as independent traders also sold sandalwood to middle-men in urban areas. Monies from sandalwood have been used to build homes and to buy generators, gas stoves, water tanks and outboard motors. Sandalwood trading ceased in 2014 because the mature trees were all harvested when this study was undertaken. There were also stringent regulations put in place by the Onoilau Development Committee and the Fiji government on the marketing of sandalwood products. These contributed to hardships in trading sandalwood by individual families.

Other sources of income and village development projects

Other sources of income are cash remittances from relatives living overseas and relatives with salaried positions in Suva and other urban centers, but this applies only to a minority.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, young village boys who had left school and some middle-aged men were engaged in seasonal casual work in farms in New Zealand. The seasonal working scheme in New Zealand did not continue due to the strong labour movement in New Zealand. However, some local seasonal casual work took place in farms in Fiji during this period. Harvesting in sugarcane fields and pine tree planting in the Western Division of Viti Levu and Labasa in Vanua Levu attracted some young and middle-aged men. Women did not participate in this seasonal work in farms locally or overseas. A few of these casual workers from the village worked in estates on Taveuni Island in the Northern Division of Fiji, cutting copra or planting cocoa.

The village sponsors groups of young and middle-aged men from Matokana village to work primarily for village projects since the 1960s to the present time. Those who participate in seasonal work retain only half of their wages while the other half is contributed to the village development projects such as building water tanks, extending the church building and building communal buildings such as community halls.

Another source of income is from the communal collection of money, or *soli*, in urban centers for education scholarships for villagers and village development projects. For example, in 2000, relatives of Matokana villagers living in urban areas throughout Fiji collected FJD 9,000 in one day as a contribution to Matokana village development projects. The Fiji Government, under its Rural Development Programme, provided additional support to the Matokana village development projects after one third of these FJD 9,000 was paid to them. This included building three communal flush toilets and showers, and installing two telephone lines on either side of the village. Men and women from the urban centers in Viti Levu and Matokana villagers spearheaded these projects.



Figure 7. Pandanus (*voivo*) dried for mat making



Figure 8. Scented coconut oil prepared by women ready for sieving and transfer into bottles



In the 1970s, the Matokana villagers living in the urban areas contributed one-third payments to the Fiji government for the purchase and installation of power generators. They also contributed towards the building of water reservoirs and the installation of water pumps to pump water from the reservoirs to the village.



Figure 9. Drying sea cucumbers in the sun

The sale of mats, coconut oil, tapa and other items provided a little extra income to the villagers. Relatives in Suva or other urban markets in Viti Levu usually sell these. Coconut oil is sold to teachers teaching in the two local schools in Onoilau.

The 2014 survey found that young men in the village are actively participating in diving and selling bêche-de-mer. The groups are well organised and collect bêche-de-mer (sea cucumbers) from offshore lagoons (Vuataono) and from the offshore islands of Tuvanaïra and Tuvanaïcolo within the Ono-i-Lau group of islands.



Figure 10. Washing at the borehole during the 2014 drought



Figure 11. Coconut buns ready for the oven



Figure 12. Sea bird eggs collected from bird rookeries by both men and women for food

Sea cucumbers are often collected by men and by some women from the various sites and then brought to Matokana village, where they are salted and sun-dried by women. Then an agent or middleman transports them to Suva for sale to the Chinese agents. The money is then sent back to the village by money order through the postal services. Bêche-de-mer is one of the most lucrative marine products being sold in urban markets for overseas markets.

Roles of men and women

The people of Matokana Village are hard-working people. Men and women support one another in cleaning the village in order to live in a tidy environment. Vegetable gardens are important to men to support their households' daily needs. Sometimes men work collectively to plant yams and cassava. Women do not in any way get involved in gardening, but they usually visit the gardens to fetch vegetables. Women's roles are restricted to household chores (cooking, cleaning and washing) (Figs 10 and 11), fishing and weaving mats. These gender roles have not changed.

Both men and women collect sea bird eggs from egg rookeries (Figure 12) on the islands of Niuta and Yanuya.

The women's club in the village is typical of village women's clubs everywhere in Fiji. Its activities include sewing sessions and the occasional fund-raising effort for the church or school. It is usually effective in getting results when an occasion requiring women's co-operative effort arises. In 2014, the Ministry of Women and Social Welfare built a house for the women in the village where they could have their meetings or hold activities to promote women's interests. Before that, women had never had a house dedicated solely to their interest. This was seen as a major step forward in the recognition of women's contribution to village development.



Figure 13. A fisherman with his spear gun



Figure 14. A Matokana woman processing fish and invertebrates for cooking

Men's and women's roles in fishing activities

In the 2014 survey, the younger men were found to frequently undertake spear fishing at night in groups from boats. In the past, usually men went hand-line fishing on Saturday nights so that the catch could be eaten on Sunday, a day that Fijian villagers respect and greatly honour as a day of rest and religious worship.

Women engage in a great deal of fishing for reef-fish, shell-fish, and crabs and other crustaceans. For example, women and children sometimes spend two or three nights on Udui Island, fishing and processing their catch before they return to the village. If an account is taken of all the fishery products included in the household diet, women contribute more in quantity than the men. However, men contribute a lot in terms of fish catch per unit effort, even though women fish more frequently.

The women of Matokana are mainly responsible for processing fish and invertebrate catches (Figure 14) after they come back from fishing or after the men return from fishing. They are also responsible for cooking the fish, either boiling it or cooking it in coconut milk with green leafy vegetables.

Observations in November 2014 show that women keep live crabs in cages near their homes (Figure 15). These crabs are mainly fed with coconuts but occasionally they are fed mangrove leaves. Keeping crabs in cages was not usually practised in the past but it was observed in Matokana Village in 2014. Recently, women have also used coconut as bait in mangrove areas to make it easier to catch crabs because they aggregate where the food source or coconuts are located.



Figure 15. Crabs in crab pens in the village fed with coconut meat



Conclusion

The mean number of people per household in Matokana decreased from 6.6 people in 1982 to 5.3 people in 2002 within a period of 20 years. Over a decade later, it decreased further to 3.0 people per household in 2014.

The historical changes in sources of income for the village changed from copra production, to seaweed production, to sandalwood production and to *magimagi* (sinnet) production. Other sources of income include the sale of handicrafts (mats and tapa), coconut oil and dried sea cucumbers. Partnerships in fund raising by those in the village and those in the urban areas provide further funds for village development. The Fiji government also further contributes in providing funds for village projects.

The traditional roles of men and women and have been very stable over the years. Women raise the children and take care of household chores. They also play an important role in making handicrafts such as mats and tapa and these are important for traditional obligations such as weddings and funerals. Women also take an active role in fishing especially in reef gleaning and inshore fishing.

Men, on the other hand, are traditionally the decision-makers and play an important role in maintaining gardens for food security. They also fish and young men have taken an active role in spearfishing at night. Men also contribute to providing income by making and selling *magimagi* (sinnet), the main source of income in 2014 in Matokana village.

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