

Colonial Legacies and Indigenous Resilience: Decolonization and Cultural Revitalization in Fiji and the Pacific

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ABSTRACT

Colonization has left enduring social, cultural, economic, and political legacies across Fiji and the Pacific, profoundly shaping indigenous societies and their development trajectories. The imposition of foreign governance structures, land tenure systems, and Western education disrupted traditional knowledge systems, social hierarchies, and community governance, creating persistent inequalities and challenges to cultural continuity. This paper critically examines the lasting impacts of colonization on indigenous cultures in Fiji and the wider Pacific, highlighting how historical policies have influenced contemporary issues such as land disputes, educational disparities, social stratification, and economic dependency. Drawing on Human and Indigenous Knowledge frameworks, the study explores efforts at decolonization, including curriculum reforms that integrate indigenous epistemologies, community-led cultural revitalization programs, and policy initiatives aimed at restoring indigenous governance, land rights, and social equity. The paper emphasizes the resilience and agency of Pacific communities in reclaiming identity, knowledge, and cultural practices disrupted by colonial processes. Furthermore, it investigates the role of regional and international frameworks, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, in supporting local decolonization and cultural revitalization initiatives. The findings underscore that decolonization in Fiji and the Pacific is not merely a historical or symbolic endeavour but a transformative process with implications for education, governance, economic development, and social cohesion. By centring indigenous perspectives and fostering culturally grounded solutions, Pacific nations can navigate the legacies of colonization while promoting inclusive development, social justice, and cultural sustainability. This paper contributes to broader discourses on postcolonial studies, indigenous rights, and Pacific development, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders committed to creating equitable and culturally vibrant futures.

Keywords: colonization, decolonization, indigenous cultures, Fiji, Pacific, cultural revitalization, indigenous knowledge, postcolonial studies.

INTRODUCTION

Colonization has left a profound and enduring imprint on the societies, cultures, and governance systems of Fiji and the broader Pacific region. European powers, including Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, imposed foreign political structures, economic systems, and educational frameworks that disrupted indigenous governance, knowledge systems, and social cohesion (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2006). In Fiji, British colonial rule (1874–1970) not only restructured land tenure through the imposition of statutory law but also introduced the Indian indentured labour system, creating long-lasting socio-ethnic dynamics that continue to shape politics, social relations, and economic structures (Lal, 1983; Government of Fiji, 2020). Across the Pacific, similar colonial interventions entrenched unequal power relations, marginalized indigenous knowledge, and prioritized Western epistemologies at

the expense of local cultural and environmental practices (Crocombe, 2001).

The impacts of colonization are not confined to history; they manifest in contemporary challenges that affect education, land rights, economic development, and social equity. Indigenous knowledge systems, which once guided sustainable resource management, health practices, and community governance, were systematically undermined, leaving gaps in cultural continuity and local problem-solving capacities (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2009). Education systems in many Pacific nations continue to reflect colonial legacies, privileging Western curricula and knowledge frameworks while inadequately integrating indigenous perspectives (UNESCO, 2023). Similarly, political and economic structures often perpetuate hierarchies introduced during colonial rule, contributing to persistent disparities between urban and rural populations, as well as

between indigenous and non-indigenous communities (Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat [PIFS], 2023).

In response to these enduring legacies, Pacific nations are actively engaging in **decolonization efforts** that seek to reclaim indigenous identity, knowledge, and cultural practices. Decolonization in this context is both a philosophical and practical endeavour, encompassing initiatives such as curriculum reforms that integrate indigenous epistemologies, land reform policies, community-led cultural revitalization, and participation in regional and international frameworks like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (Nabobo-Baba, 2022; PIFS, 2023). These efforts reflect a broader movement to foster social justice, cultural sustainability, and inclusive development that aligns with the values and worldviews of Pacific communities.

This paper critically examines the **lasting impacts of colonization on indigenous cultures in Fiji and the Pacific**, situating historical legacies alongside contemporary decolonization initiatives. By analysing the interplay between colonial histories, socio-cultural disruption, and indigenous resilience, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how Pacific communities navigate the legacies of colonization while pursuing cultural revitalization and self-determination. Ultimately, the paper contributes to broader discourses on postcolonial studies, indigenous rights, and Pacific development, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and community leaders committed to creating equitable, culturally grounded, and sustainable futures.

Literature Review

The lasting impacts of colonization on indigenous societies have been widely documented, highlighting the disruption of cultural, social, and economic systems across the Pacific. Early studies emphasize how colonial powers imposed Western governance, legal systems, and education, often marginalizing indigenous knowledge and practices (Crocombe, 2001; Lal, 1983). In Fiji, the British colonial administration restructured land tenure, introduced the indentured labour system, and centralized governance, which created enduring socio-economic hierarchies and interethnic tensions (Lal, 1983; Government of Fiji, 2020). Similar patterns are observed across other Pacific island nations, where colonial intervention altered social organization, land use, and community leadership structures (Crocombe, 2001).

Scholars argue that colonial education systems systematically devalued indigenous knowledge, privileging Western epistemologies and literacy, which continues to shape contemporary educational and social outcomes (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). Decolonization of education has thus emerged as a critical pathway for cultural revitalization, aiming to integrate indigenous epistemologies, local languages, and traditional knowledge into curricula (Thaman, 2014; Nabobo-Baba, 2020). These efforts are supported by regional frameworks such as the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, which

emphasizes cultural sustainability, community empowerment, and indigenous-led development (PIFS, 2023).

Contemporary literature also highlights the role of indigenous resilience in countering the legacies of colonization. Studies indicate that Pacific communities actively engage in cultural preservation through arts, language revitalization, and governance reforms, demonstrating agency in reclaiming identity and autonomy (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2014). Furthermore, international frameworks, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), provide legal and moral support for local decolonization initiatives, reinforcing indigenous rights, self-determination, and social justice (UNESCO, 2023).

Overall, the literature underscores a dual perspective: colonization's enduring negative impacts and the proactive strategies of indigenous communities toward decolonization, cultural revitalization, and sustainable development. These findings provide a foundational context for analysing contemporary policies, educational reforms, and social initiatives in Fiji and the Pacific, highlighting both challenges and opportunities in navigating postcolonial realities.

Literature Gaps

Despite the growing body of research on the impacts of colonization and decolonization in the Pacific, several critical gaps remain in the literature. First, much of the existing scholarship has focused on **historical narratives and macro-level analysis**, often emphasizing colonial policies, land tenure, and governance structures (Lal, 1983; Crocombe, 2001). While these studies provide valuable historical context, there is limited empirical research on the **everyday experiences and perspectives of indigenous communities**, particularly regarding how colonial legacies affect cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge transfer (Nabobo-Baba, 2020).

Second, although education is recognized as a key site for decolonization, the literature is heavily weighted toward **policy description rather than evaluation**. Studies have highlighted the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and languages in curricula (Thaman, 2014; UNESCO, 2023), but there is insufficient evidence on **how these initiatives impact learning outcomes, cultural resilience, and community empowerment** in Fiji and other Pacific nations.

Third, much of the research emphasizes Fiji or larger Pacific nations while **smaller or more remote islands remain underrepresented**. Comparative studies across the region are limited, leaving a gap in understanding the diversity of colonial experiences, cultural impacts, and localized decolonization strategies. This limits the ability to generalize findings and to identify scalable solutions for broader Pacific contexts (PIFS, 2023).

Fourth, the role of **gender, youth, and marginalized groups** in decolonization efforts is underexplored. While indigenous resilience is frequently discussed, there is minimal focus on how women, youth, and minority communities navigate, challenge, or contribute to reclaiming cultural knowledge and identity in postcolonial societies (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).

Finally, there is a **lack of interdisciplinary approaches** that link historical, sociological, educational, and political perspectives to provide holistic insights into colonization's legacies and the processes of decolonization. Integrating perspectives from indigenous knowledge systems, postcolonial theory, and contemporary development studies could strengthen understanding of how Pacific societies can achieve cultural, social, and economic sustainability in the postcolonial era.

Addressing these gaps, this study focuses on the **intersections of historical legacies, indigenous resilience, and contemporary decolonization initiatives** in Fiji and the Pacific, offering nuanced insights that contribute both to scholarly literature and policy development.

Fiji and the Pacific: Historical, Socio-Cultural, and Political Context

Colonization profoundly shaped the histories, social structures, and governance systems of Fiji and the wider Pacific, leaving legacies that continue to influence contemporary societies. In Fiji, British colonial rule (1874–1970) introduced significant socio-political and economic changes. The establishment of a centralized colonial administration replaced traditional chiefly governance structures, while the introduction of the Indian indentured labour system (*Girmit*) created complex ethnic and social dynamics that persist today (Lal, 1983; Government of Fiji, 2020). Similarly, other Pacific island nations experienced colonial interventions that altered indigenous political authority, land ownership systems, and trade patterns, often privileging European settlers or foreign powers over local communities (Crocombe, 2001).

Socio-Cultural Impacts

Colonial policies disrupted traditional knowledge systems, languages, and cultural practices across the Pacific. Missionary education prioritized Western religious and academic frameworks, marginalizing indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). This cultural displacement contributed to the erosion of indigenous identity, as communities were compelled to adapt to foreign social norms and hierarchies. In Fiji, the integration of Western schooling alongside the colonial labour system reshaped family and community structures, creating new generational divides in knowledge, skills, and cultural transmission (Nabobo-Baba, 2020). Across the region, the suppression or undervaluation of traditional arts, governance, and ecological management practices disrupted both social cohesion and sustainable environmental stewardship (Thaman, 2014).

Political and Economic Legacies

Colonial land policies and governance frameworks continue to shape economic and political realities. In Fiji, approximately 83% of land remains under customary ownership, reflecting a complex interplay between indigenous rights and statutory law inherited from colonial administration (Government of Fiji, 2020). Economically, colonization oriented Pacific economies toward resource extraction, plantation agriculture, and cash-crop production, creating dependencies on external markets and limiting local economic diversification (Crocombe, 2001). Politically, Western-style legal and administrative systems imposed during colonization often conflicted with traditional governance, creating enduring tensions between modern state structures and indigenous authority. These legacies contribute to contemporary challenges in policy implementation, land disputes, and equitable development across Fiji and the Pacific.

Contemporary Relevance and Decolonization Efforts

The historical impacts of colonization are intertwined with ongoing efforts at decolonization, cultural revitalization, and indigenous empowerment. Education reform, including the integration of indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural values into curricula, is a primary strategy for reclaiming cultural identity and promoting social equity (Thaman, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). Community-led initiatives to revive traditional arts, ceremonies, and governance practices further demonstrate indigenous resilience and agency in shaping contemporary Pacific societies (Nabobo-Baba, 2020). At the regional level, frameworks such as the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent emphasize cultural sustainability, community empowerment, and inclusive development, aligning local decolonization initiatives with broader political and economic planning (PIFS, 2023).

In sum, understanding Fiji and the Pacific's historical, socio-cultural, and political context is essential for analysing the persistent legacies of colonization and the strategies employed by indigenous communities to reclaim identity, knowledge, and governance. This context provides the foundation for examining contemporary challenges and opportunities in education, policy, and cultural revitalization, positioning decolonization as both a practical and transformative process for the region.

Discussion and Analysis

The enduring legacies of colonization in Fiji and the Pacific are multifaceted, encompassing socio-cultural, political, and economic dimensions. Historical analyses indicate that colonial governance and economic systems were designed to serve external interests, often at the expense of indigenous communities (Crocombe, 2001; Lal, 1983). In Fiji, for example, the British-imposed land tenure system and the importation of

indentured Indian labour fundamentally altered social hierarchies and economic relations, producing persistent ethnic and economic disparities (Government of Fiji, 2020). Across the Pacific, similar colonial interventions disrupted traditional governance, marginalized indigenous knowledge, and created structural dependencies that persist in contemporary development challenges (Thaman, 2014).

Socio-Cultural Implications

Colonization has had profound socio-cultural impacts, particularly in the realm of education and knowledge transmission. Missionary and colonial education systems prioritized Western epistemologies, often devaluing indigenous languages, cultural practices, and traditional ecological knowledge (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). This legacy manifests in contemporary educational gaps and a limited integration of local knowledge into curricula, despite policy efforts toward cultural inclusion (UNESCO, 2023). However, literature and field observations indicate that Pacific communities actively engage in cultural revitalization, demonstrating resilience and agency in reclaiming indigenous identity through language programs, arts, and community governance initiatives (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2014).

Political and Economic Dimensions

The political and economic consequences of colonization remain evident in land tenure conflicts, governance structures, and economic dependencies. Fiji's predominantly customary land ownership system, while protecting indigenous rights, interacts with colonial statutory frameworks, often complicating land administration and policy implementation (Government of Fiji, 2020). Economically, the region's reliance on extractive industries and cash crops, a legacy of colonial economic planning, limits diversification and increases vulnerability to global market fluctuations (Crocombe, 2001). These structural challenges underscore the need for policies that integrate indigenous perspectives, community participation, and sustainable development principles.

Decolonization and Indigenous Resilience

Decolonization in the Pacific is both a philosophical and practical endeavour, involving the reclamation of cultural knowledge, political autonomy, and educational systems. Education reform emerges as a central strategy, with initiatives designed to integrate indigenous epistemologies, values, and local languages into formal schooling (Thaman, 2014; UNESCO, 2023). Community-led cultural revitalization programs further illustrate the capacity of Pacific societies to preserve identity, strengthen social cohesion, and adapt governance systems to contemporary needs (Nabobo-Baba, 2020). At the regional level, frameworks such as the **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** provide strategic guidance for harmonizing

local initiatives with regional goals, emphasizing inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural sovereignty (PIFS, 2023).

Critical Analysis

While progress in decolonization is evident, challenges persist. Literature gaps highlight the need for empirical research on the effectiveness of educational reforms, the role of youth and women in cultural revitalization, and the impact of policy interventions on indigenous socio-economic empowerment (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2009). Furthermore, smaller or remote Pacific islands are often underrepresented in research, limiting the generalizability of findings and the development of region-wide strategies. Integrating interdisciplinary approaches that combine history, education, political science, and indigenous knowledge systems is essential to fully understand the complexities of decolonization in Fiji and the Pacific.

In conclusion, the discussion reveals that colonization's legacy is not solely historical but continues to shape contemporary socio-cultural, political, and economic realities. Pacific communities demonstrate resilience through targeted decolonization initiatives, educational reforms, and cultural revitalization, providing a pathway for reclaiming identity, promoting social equity, and achieving sustainable development in postcolonial contexts.

Recommendations

1. **Education Reform:** Pacific education systems should continue integrating indigenous epistemologies, local languages, and traditional knowledge into curricula. Programs should be evaluated empirically to assess their impact on learning outcomes, cultural resilience, and community engagement (Thaman, 2014; UNESCO, 2023).
2. **Cultural Revitalization:** Governments and communities should support initiatives that preserve and promote indigenous arts, ceremonies, and governance structures, fostering intergenerational knowledge transmission and reinforcing social cohesion (Nabobo-Baba, 2020).
3. **Policy and Governance:** Policymakers should harmonize statutory frameworks with indigenous governance and land tenure systems, ensuring that development policies respect cultural norms and promote equitable participation in decision-making (Government of Fiji, 2020).
4. **Inclusive Development:** Decolonization strategies should intentionally include women, youth, and marginalized groups, recognizing their critical role in sustaining cultural knowledge, driving innovation, and fostering community resilience (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).
5. **Research and Interdisciplinary Approaches:** Future studies should adopt interdisciplinary perspectives, integrating history, education, political science, and indigenous knowledge systems. Comparative research

across Pacific nations, including smaller or remote islands, is needed to develop contextually relevant, scalable decolonization strategies (PIFS, 2023).

6. **Regional and International Collaboration:** Engagement with frameworks such as UNDRIP and Pacific regional strategies can strengthen local decolonization initiatives by providing legal, policy, and technical support while fostering knowledge exchange among Pacific nations (UNESCO, 2023; PIFS, 2023).

By implementing these recommendations, Fiji and the wider Pacific can navigate the legacies of colonization while promoting **cultural sustainability, social equity, and inclusive development**, positioning indigenous communities at the centre of transformative regional growth.

CONCLUSION

Colonization has left enduring socio-cultural, political, and economic legacies in Fiji and the Pacific, shaping indigenous societies in ways that continue to affect identity, governance, education, and economic development. Historical interventions disrupted traditional knowledge systems, imposed Western epistemologies, and created structural inequalities, with consequences that persist across generations (Crocombe, 2001; Lal, 1983). In Fiji, the introduction of the Indian indentured labour system and British land policies restructured social hierarchies and economic relations, contributing to ongoing ethnic, social, and economic complexities (Government of Fiji, 2020). Across the Pacific, similar colonial experiences marginalized indigenous knowledge, altered governance systems, and limited local agency in policy and development processes (Thaman, 2014).

Despite these legacies, Pacific communities demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. Efforts at decolonization, including education reforms that integrate indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural values, as well as community-led cultural revitalization initiatives, highlight the proactive strategies employed to reclaim identity, strengthen social cohesion, and restore cultural continuity (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2009). Regional frameworks such as the **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** further support these initiatives by aligning local cultural and governance priorities with broader strategic goals, promoting inclusivity, sustainability, and cultural sovereignty (PIFS, 2023).

Ultimately, addressing the enduring impacts of colonization requires a multidimensional approach that combines historical understanding, empirical research, and policy innovation. Decolonization in the Pacific is not merely symbolic but a transformative process that has implications for social equity, education, governance, and sustainable development.

The Way Forward

The way forward for Fiji and the Pacific in addressing the legacies of colonization is grounded in cultural revitalization, inclusive governance, education reform, and sustainable development.

Recognizing the historical disruptions caused by colonial interventions, Pacific nations must adopt strategies that empower indigenous communities, restore cultural identity, and promote equitable social and economic outcomes.

1. **Strengthening Indigenous Knowledge Systems:** Indigenous knowledge and practices should be central to policy-making, education, and community development. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge, governance structures, and cultural practices into contemporary frameworks can enhance resilience, environmental stewardship, and cultural continuity (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2014).
2. **Educational Transformation:** Pacific education systems should prioritize curricula that incorporate indigenous epistemologies, local languages, and cultural values. Teacher training, resource development, and community engagement are critical to ensuring that education empowers learners with both global competencies and strong cultural foundations (UNESCO, 2023).
3. **Inclusive Governance and Policy Reform:** Legal and political frameworks should harmonize statutory systems with customary governance, recognizing indigenous rights, land tenure, and decision-making structures. Policies must be inclusive, participatory, and reflective of local cultural contexts, ensuring that marginalized groups—including women and youth, are actively engaged in shaping community and national development (Government of Fiji, 2020; PIFS, 2023).
4. **Cultural Revitalization and Community Empowerment:** Programs that promote traditional arts, language revitalization, and ceremonies strengthen identity and social cohesion. Community-led initiatives, supported by regional strategies, can create platforms for intergenerational knowledge transfer and foster a sense of ownership and pride in indigenous heritage (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009).
5. **Regional Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:** Pacific nations can leverage regional and international frameworks, such as the 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent and UNDRIP, to share best practices, secure resources, and develop cohesive strategies for decolonization and sustainable development (PIFS, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Collaborative initiatives can address common challenges such as climate change, economic vulnerability, and cultural erosion while strengthening regional identity and solidarity.
6. **Research and Innovation:** There is a need for continued interdisciplinary research that evaluates the effectiveness of decolonization strategies, identifies gaps, and documents innovative approaches to integrating indigenous knowledge into education, governance, and development. Such research should include voices from smaller, remote islands and marginalized communities to ensure that solutions are contextually relevant and inclusive (Nabobo-Baba, 2020; Thaman, 2014).

In summary, the way forward for Fiji and the Pacific involves strategic, culturally grounded, and inclusive approaches that reconcile historical legacies with contemporary development goals. By centring indigenous knowledge, promoting equitable policies, and fostering regional collaboration, Pacific communities can navigate the challenges of postcolonial realities and chart a sustainable, culturally vibrant future.

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/ILO_THLD2024_final.pdf

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