

PREFACE

Thirty years ago, right after finishing law school, I went to Sāmoa. My flight to Apia via Nadi was delayed in Nadi's airport for several hours. While I was killing time with a trip to Lautoka town's market and back to the airport, my cab driver, Babu Ram, explained why the airport was overwhelmed: many Indo-Fijians were fleeing the country, seeing little future in staying in Fiji. The Indo-Fijian diaspora had started less than two years before on 25 September 1987, after an army colonel, Sitiveni Rabuka, staged his second *coup d'état*. Rabuka declared Fiji a republic on 7 October 1987, abrogating the Constitution of Fiji and declaring himself Head of the Interim Military Government. The Commonwealth responded with Fiji's immediate expulsion from the association, and the tensions between indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian ethnic groups were starting to crumble Fiji's model of biracial political harmony.

A month later, on my way back home from Sāmoa I decided to stop in Fiji again, and to spend a whole week in its capital city, Suva. Obviously, there were not many tourists around. Perhaps this explains why, with no reservation, I was able to get a large room, with a rusty fan and a lot of dust and nostalgia, in the Grand Pacific Hotel, Fiji's grand old lady on Suva's waterfront. Almost immediately after I left, the hotel closed down for two decades. When I asked the name of a solitary island whose silhouette was visible in the twilight to the south of my room, I was told it was called Beqa and was known in Fiji as "the island of the firewalkers." I was also told that, back in the day, the firewalkers used to perform outside the hotel and across the street at Thurston Gardens surrounding the Fiji Museum. The next morning, I went to the museum.

I was not the first Italian scholar to visit the Fiji Museum; that was likely Vittorio Beonio Brocchieri, an Italian political science professor turned popular journalist. Brocchieri describes his hasty visit to the museum, which had only recently opened on the upper floor of the Carnegie Library on Victoria Parade, in his *Vita Selvaggia* ("savage life"), published in 1938. I discovered the book in the library of my maternal grandfather, a World War I Horse Artillery Colonel also named Guido. He probably found it quite amusing, particularly because he was in dissent with the racial laws being passed at that time by the fascist regime in Italy. What I found remarkable is that, right next to it, my grandfather kept another book by Brocchieri, *Camminare sul Fuoco* (walking on fire), which chronicles his journey in 1963 to observe the

Anastenaria firewalking and religious healing in Langada, Greek Macedonia. In the book, Brocchieri only briefly mentions that firewalking has also been reported in Polynesia, citing Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl.

Beyond coincidences emerging from my family archives, as for my own visit to the Fiji Museum, I remember nobody could give me a straight answer about the firewalkers of Beqa, beyond just pointing at their island, and I found no clues at the museum either. Perhaps this is one of the reasons I returned to Fiji ten years later, joining a Pacific prehistory project launched in the summer of 1999 by the Fiji Museum under the direction of Terry Hunt, at that time teaching archaeology at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. By the summer of 2002 my research goals were set, and I conducted a month of preliminary fieldwork in Beqa. My most prolific period was from October 2004 to July 2005, when I lived between the chiefly village of Dakuibeqa and Suva's Domain. I made shorter visits to Beqa in 2008, 2010, and 2013.

Mention firewalking to just about anyone and the response is likely to be skepticism or a remark about the paranormal. To be very honest, I experienced some skepticism myself when, in October 1992, I was invited to walk through a bed of gleaming white-hot stones along with a large number of Maohi and Māori people, and other nonnatives attending the Sixth Festival of Pacific Arts in Rarotonga, in the Cook Islands. I was there to prepare a documentary film for Italian television and to interview Raymond Teriirooterai Arioi Graffe, *grand prêtre des cérémonies traditionnelles tahitiennes*, said to be the only person left in French Polynesia able to conduct the firewalking ritual (Pigliasco and Francalanci 1992).

Even Margaret Mead, in a quite obscure "Appendix C" to her *Continuities in Cultural Evolution* (1964), seems to have fallen into the same skepticism when she writes (362–3):

[I]t would be necessary to place this custom itself in a complex context... [A] custom which has two characteristic forms—the specific practice of walking on hot stones (the form taken by Fijian and Tahitian fire-walking) and walking on hot coals... A full discussion would include an attempt to measure "the genuineness" of the fire-walkers' immunity from burning.

Mead is on point about the correlation between Fijian and Tahitian firewalking customs. However, while the history of scientific investigation of the firewalk is largely a history of skepticism, it was never my intent to propose an explanation for fire-immunity or what has enabled firewalking to become such a widespread practice.

It's worth considering, though, that firewalking on either hot stones or coals has been around for a while; the earliest known reference to firewalking dates back to Iron Age India, around 1200 BC, and the oldest known record of a firewalk is of one that took place in India over four thousand years ago (Vaniprabha and Madhusudhan 2019:297). Firewalking is the most common of non-ordinary phenomena. As Pearce (1977:157) argued:

Firewalking is such a common occurrence in so many countries simply because of the universal experience of fire itself. The idea is assimilated so easily because the points of similarity are so great that the few points of dissimilarity needing accommodation are not overwhelming. The act is impossible and incomprehensible to thinking as thinking, but not to thinking as action.

Considering that Firenze University Press is one of the major university publishers in Italy, let me get off my chest my position on Ernesto De Martino, a founding father of anthropology in Italy. Like Margaret Mead and several scholars who have commented on Fijian firewalking, De Martino never visited Beqa or even Fiji. In *Il Mondo Magico*, completed in August 1946 and published in 1948 (posthumously translated by Paul Saye White, and published with the title *The World of Magic* in the United States in 1972, and with the title *Primitive Magic* in the United Kingdom in 1988), De Martino investigates the links between parapsychology and anthropology. *Il Mondo Magico* was De Martino's work-revelation and is still a source of persisting bewilderment and fertile debate (Berardini 2013:11), in which he draws on his deep knowledge of folk Catholicism, superstitions, taboos, and magical rituals. He offers a gripping interpretation of the Fijian firewalking ceremony: "The natives of the Fiji Islands cook and eat the ripe 'masawe' root [*Dracaena terminalis*]. The actual cooking of the root is a ceremony in itself, called the 'vilavilairevo' which means 'he who enters the furnace'" (1986:29, 1988:10). "In the fire-walk of Mbenga [Beqa]," De Martino (1986:86–87, 1988:62) concludes:

the nullification of the burning property of fire expresses a communication with "spirits," made possible through the particular privilege accorded the descendants of Na Galita [Tuiqalita]. The pit is consecrated in gratitude for the communication, as is the food. This food is also part of the ceremony and participates in the "mana" that is created.

Sadly, De Martino's brilliant insights on the *vilavilairevo* also appeared in the Italian journal *Historia Naturalis* under the magniloquent title "Il Signoreggiamento del Fuoco" (The Lordship of Fire, 1949), relying solely on the narratives of two medical doctors on New Zealand ships, Thomas Hocken (1898) and Robert Fulton (1903), and of two British colonial administrators in Fiji, Kingsley Roth (1902, 1933) and Basil Thompson (1894, 1895). More piteously, anthropologists in Italy have not continued De Martino's work on firewalking, with the exception of Bartoli's (1998) study on the practice of walking on burning embers by the *posadores* of San Pedro Manrique in the provinces of Soria, Castile and León, Spain.

The idea of magic challenges our basic concepts of reality and of the natural order of things. The typical reaction of disbelief to magical phenomena is actually not surprising. In confuting the idea that "magic is for eccentrics and fakes, or for unenlightened savages" (1988:i), De Martino points out the error of

this line of thought. Commenting on Hegel's *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1817), De Martino observes, "For Hegel magic is still something within the area of 'superstitions' and 'abnormalities of weak minds.'" Hegel doesn't realize, according to De Martino, that if humanity had not achieved the liberation that is made possible through magic we would not now be striving so vigorously for a final and complete liberation of the mind (1986:258, 1988:201). What is "real" for us is not necessarily real for other people: "Whether magic powers, even to some extent, are real or not, is a question that depends upon *what is meant by 'real'*" (De Martino 1986:87, 1988:63).

Similarly, De Martino expressed to Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce his doubts about the theoretical hold of a philosophy of the mind that refused to thematize magical phenomena as a genuine historical problem, presenting Croce with an ethnological interest to which he was not at all sensitive (Croce 1949:193–208). In a letter to Croce, De Martino writes:

Magic is the "history as thought and action" of the primitives; if nature is, as you say, history without history as by us written, then magic is a story of nature represented and acted upon, if not really by the plants and animals of which nature is made up, then by men very close to plants and animals, and therefore able to do more to remake nature than we are. (De Martino 2007:63; see also Berardini 2013:63)

Borrowing from De Martino, for those who practice it, magic is a system of compensations, guarantees, and protections, as well as a vital form of self-preservation, and by extension, I would add, of social capital. When I asked Ro Mereani Tuimatanisiga, a member of the Sawau chiefly family in Beqa, to comment on my choice not to essay any explanation on the human body's fire-immunity, but to focus instead on her tribe's social body's epistemologies related to their cultural heritage, she very eloquently replied:

If we were to delve into the physiological aspects of the *vilavilairevo*, I feel it would take away from the tribe the magic *mana* that every member of the tribe (including myself) feels the *vilavilairevo* gives each one of us, i.e., our faith and belief in our protection from what we call "the children" or *ko ira na gone* or *veli*. One can argue the way it is being publicised today in the hotels is resulting in a slow erosion of the *mana* or magic. I feel that this process will ultimately expose *vilavilairevo* as a psychological process in the "mind over matter" category. My own concern is for the well-being of the Sawau tribe, and I feel that to seek out physiological reasons why they are not burned would certainly bring confusion into the whole ceremony. Such confusion may well result in people being burned. As there are at present no proven theories of the physiological reason for our tribe's ability to walk on fire, there is room for an array of different hypothetical interpretations, any of which would negatively affect the tribe's association of the *vilavilairevo* with a sense of "magic." As outside observers we should be very cautious indeed of undermining a belief

system, a *weltanschauung*, of a tribe. It is perhaps true that external observers as well as some members of the tribe, including myself, who have a broader view can entertain a range of alternate hypotheses, but such speculation is deleterious in its effect. (Ro Mereani Tuimatanisiga pers. comm. 24 May 2007)

I owe a special debt of gratitude to Ro Mereani and her son Felix, who provided ideas, support, and invaluable ethnographic data. The privilege of staying in the village of Dakuibeqa was accorded to me by her brother, the chief of the Sawau people (Tui Sawau), Ratu Timoci Matanitobua, who not only approved my research but also acted as a liaison with government officials in Suva. The Sawau people of Beqa were very generous to me. I am equally indebted to the Naivilaqata *bete* (priestly) clan members of the Sawau *yavusa* (tribe), who actively participated in the process of remapping their culture and knowledge. There are no words to thank the late *bete* Samu Vakuruivalu and his family. His hospitality made my stay in Dakuibeqa always an unforgettably pleasant experience, and his guidance through the back regions and back stages of the tourist industry was priceless: taking me on long hikes in the upper Namoliwai River rainforest of Beqa, along routes that only his father and a few other Sawau elders knew, to map the acclaimed “source” of the *vilavilairevo*; allowing me to be at his side in the hotels’ and resorts’ staff cafeterias and locker rooms before the shows, and, after the shows and several cups of kava, to crash with him and the other Sawau firewalkers on the floor of Navua harbor’s mosquito-infested community hall until our early morning passage back to Beqa.

Deep inside I have always known that I would not follow in my father’s footsteps as a lawyer; while I was preparing for the bar exam in 1991 I wrote a letter to Professor Jean Guiart, author of *Océanie* (1963) and head of the Laboratoire d’ethnologie du Musée de l’Homme in Paris, for advice. I had asked my mother to mail it from Paris to be sure he would receive it. Guiart replied right away, suggesting I apply to the Université Paris-Dauphine. I did not, and it took me nine more years to find my mentor while practicing law for a living. I could not imagine a better, more supportive, or more encouraging mentor than Andrew Arno, who had studied with Klaus Friedrich Koch at Harvard and who generously made me part of the legal anthropology lineage initiated by Koch and Laura Nader at Berkeley. It is impossible to count all the ways Andrew helped me in my career. I am much obliged to him and honored to dedicate this book to him, in particular the last chapter, which is my last essay benefiting from his impeccable supervision.

Working with Andrew, it became clear to me that my interest in the view from below and in the “less visible faces of law”—as in the case of the intangible cultural properties of the Sawau people—necessitated an unconventional ethnographic approach to disentangle the intertwined topics of property, heritage, commodification, tradition, and change on Beqa. In every tradition of theistic belief there are records of questioning doubt and

disbelief; although Andrew sadly could not complete the architecture of his last project on “doubt” and its congeries of related terms, an elegant spinoff of his last book (2009), “doubt,” “belief,” and “disbelief” inform several aspects of my research in Beqa.

In a recent article kindly shared with me by Karen Brison, she observes that in Fiji, “Pentecostal Christianity can lead to moral tensions by advocating the impossible goal of freeing the interior self from social entanglements” (2017:657). I admit that, a few times while visiting the village of Rukua on the west coast of Beqa, after those endless Pentecostal services with high-spirited singing and enticing instrumental music, I was tempted to open up with Rukuan long-time collaborator and historian Mika Tubanavau and other Sawau close friends. Reflecting on dogmas and hierarchies, my own view is what Pietro Pomponazzi, an Aristotelian and philosopher of doubt himself, was teaching in Padua in the early sixteenth century: that demons and angels are not real, and that people do not need the threat of heaven and hell in order to be moral.

I am furthermore grateful to my colleague Matt Tomlinson for accepting my request to synthesize my work in Beqa in this book’s afterword, providing the reader with a sense of closure in a way my essays cannot do. Tomlinson’s path-breaking investigations on Christian politics in Fiji, along with his fieldwork on the neighboring island of Kadavu, paved the way for my interviews with church officials, ministers, and practitioners in Beqa and in Suva. The provocative question with which we started a workshop organized by Tomlinson and Debra McDougall at Monash University in July 2010—“What difference, after all, *does* Christianity make?”—allowed me to see the Sawau tribe’s experiences of Christianity in all their complexity and singularity. It revealed to me the increasingly complex issues of denominational competition among church groups for adherents in Beqa and how the processes of circulation involving powerful sermons and dogmatic fears influence and undermine the *vilavilairevo* ceremony itself.

National Geographic Foreign Editorial Staff Luis Marden, under the veneer of the exotic and conservative humanism typical of the popular magazine, shocked the world in the October 1958 issue by revealing that, “‘Talking with a small devil’, the brawny fire walkers remain secluded all night in a hut. Then, at a signal, they come out and walk across the pit of red-hot stones.” Despite his inaccuracies about the ritual preparation, Marden is clearly referring to the *veli*, the charming tutelary guardians of the Sawau *dawila* (firewalkers) central to the *vilavilairevo* ceremony. As Matt Tomlinson recently commented, the *veli*, “like other Oceanic little people—and especially like the *kakamora* of Makira—embody places and their pasts in new, hopeful projects of imagination that look for signs of indigenous strength” (2016:17). It is true. After Diane Purkiss’s illuminating work on fairies “menacing history,” I realized that, *mutatis mutandis*, the *italanoa* (stories) about the *veli*—

offhandedly flagged as demons by the Fijian churches—show exceedingly strict rules of behavior, not for the fairies or the *veli* but for the human beings, and that these rules exist for reasons of self-preservation, not morality (Purkiss 2000:8).

Finally, I express my *vakavinavinaka*, my deepest gratitude, to the Director of the Fiji Museum, Sipiriano Nemani, for his generous foreword. Nemani and I met in Suva in 2004 when he was just about to launch the daunting *Na ituwatua ni kilaka itaukei kei na kena matanataki* (National Inventory on Traditional Knowledge and Expressions of Culture), the ongoing Cultural Mapping Program taking place throughout Fiji's fourteen provinces and coordinated by the iTaukei Institute of Language and Culture. Nemani was instrumental in formulating research strategies and a methodology for the mapping initiative and development of a toolkit designed to provide guidance in collecting, archiving, and interpreting intangible cultural heritage in Pacific Island countries and communities. Nemani realized early on how difficult it is to distinguish, as in the case of the *vilavilavevo* ceremony, between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The Sawau people of Beqa see the different types of heritage as forming a symbiotic relationship. Nemani was therefore instrumental in the development of *The Sawau Project* (Pigliasco and Colatanavanua 2005), welcoming the idea of making it a useful multimedia educational tool to encourage indigenous communities to build research capacity, methodologies, linkages, and institutional collaborations. With his expertise in community resilience and capacity-building workshops in the Pacific Island region, Nemani was perhaps the first in Fiji to foster the idea that raising awareness can enhance “in situ” preservation, the preservation of Pacific Islanders' cultural expressions as a living, evolving body of knowledge and not merely something to be displayed in a museum.

The essays collected in this book were written over the past ten years, after I received my doctorate from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Chronicling the culture of the Sawau people of Beqa over more than a decade gave me a chance to face my own failures in grasping their worldview, and at the same time I learned how to enter more deeply into that worldview. My research did not start out as a long-term project but it has certainly turned out that way. As Clifford Geertz (1988) observed long ago, we may fall under certain illusions after our first piece of fieldwork: that we are now able to grasp the native's point of view, or that ethnography is a matter of sorting strange and irregular facts into familiar and orderly categories, when actually it is our hosts who with remarkable patience instruct us in all the domains of their lives. For this reason, anthropologists should go back to the field not only to check on various hypotheses but also out of concern for the people who have been so generous to them and to find out what is happening with their lives as the changing dynamics of technology flows accelerate the rapid turnover of ideas and beliefs.

The immaterial cultural heritage of the Sawau people with its challenges and paradoxes is the dominant theme running through the six essays which form the chapters of this book. Traditionally performed only by members of the Sawau tribe on the island of Beqa, the *vilavilaivo* is a prime example of a propitiation ritual that has become commodified to suit the requirements of tourism. Shaped by the tourists' predilection for highly visual cultural performances, *vilavilaivo* has become the signature "brand" statement of Fijian culture. From the essays collected in the book emerges a picture of how issues of property, heritage, and international policies intertwine with local realities and practices. On Beqa, cultural, religious, social, and economic relations have become more global over time through the integration of markets and the rapid spread of technologies such as social media, which are redefining concepts of identity, self-determination, public domain, and the legitimacy of international institutions, reflecting a hierarchy of power at the international level. The essays collected in this book ultimately address some fundamental issues in anthropology related to the social role of ritual and the political economy of ritual, including the legal status of ritual as a form of property poised between being a central element of cultural heritage and having a commercial role in the transnational tourist industry.

Thanks to the Firenze University Press editor and anonymous reviewers for helpful criticism and suggestions. I also express my deep gratitude to Laurie Durand and David Strauch, the hardworking editor duo who turned my essays into a readable book. Along with the publisher, I would like also to thank the following copyright holders for permission to reproduce papers. Chapter 1, *Domodomo* (journal of the Fiji Museum); chapter 2, *People and Culture in Oceania* (journal of the Japanese Society for Oceanic Studies); chapter 3, *Pacific Studies*; chapter 4, *Oceania*; and chapter 5, *International Journal of Cultural Property*.