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2012

### Chapter 8, Individuals, in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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#### Recommended Citation

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## VIII

### **Individuals: Diversity in Life Experiences**

When anthropologists do fieldwork, they don't live in other societies; they live with other people. Anthropologists' descriptions of "societies" "cultures," or "social systems," are inferred and constructed from interviews, conversations, observations, and daily events. My understanding of Sikaiana society is derived from interacting with a variety of different personalities under a variety of different circumstances.

#### FANE

At the time of my stay in 1980-1983, Fane was the oldest person on Sikaiana. The children of her daughters were mature and themselves had children; several of her great-grandchildren were approaching maturity. She had numerous foster children. Many of them were grown with families of their own. Some were living with her.

When Fane was born, no birth records were kept on Sikaiana. Once when I tried to correlate her approximate age with historical events, she pointed to a young girl of about 12 or 13 and claimed she was that age during the time when a trader named Oscar Svensen operated a store on Sikaiana. There are documented accounts that Svensen operated his store in the early 1900s. When the Anglican missionaries arrived in 1929, both of Fane's daughters had been born. These daughters started having children in the 1940s. Her younger daughter was one of the very last women to have her thighs tattooed. Although Fane knew some words of Pijin, she did not speak it. Fane's husband was one of the few people who remained unconverted to Christianity at the time of his death during World War II. During my stay, Fane attended church frequently.

She had spent most of her life on Sikaiana with a few trips abroad, including visits to Honiara, Yandina and the Western Province near Papua-New Guinea. When I knew her, she no longer went into the bush to work in the gardens or feed pigs. She walked with a limp and helped herself with a cane. Sometimes, she plaited mats. She often spent her time in the company of several other widows, who gathered together to cook, talk and gossip. In 1982, the second year of my stay, Fane had been ailing for several months. Her family (her daughter and her brothers' sons) decided to move her to Honiara in order to use the medical facilities there. Like many older people, Fane would have preferred to stay on Sikaiana and, when her time came, to die there.

Fane was an adult participant in many traditional ceremonies which are no longer practiced. Her foster father was Semalu, the last traditional chief of Sikaiana. She learned many traditional songs from him, especially *mako o te henua*, a genre of songs which were learned from other Polynesian islands. Although many of the words in these songs are recognizable as Polynesian, they are not Sikaiana.

Her marriage had been arranged. She explained to me the behavior of secret lovers, *hina*, and recounted some vivid descriptions of her encounters. She had learned the traditional techniques for midwifery. Occasionally, she advised young relatives about their pregnancies, but she was reluctant because the government discouraged people from using customary medicine rather than Western medical practices. John Kilatu, the Sikaiana doctor, objected to some of the practices of the midwives as medically unsound.

She also knew some of the rituals associated with the one traditional ceremonial office held by a woman, the *sapai ulu*. The *sapai ulu* assisted the chief in some of his ceremonial duties by dressing him in his ceremonial ornaments, and in doing so, she apparently transformed his social identity into the ritual one of "chief." When the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands visited Sikaiana as part of a tour in 1982, the Sikaiana performed several traditional ceremonies and songs in his honor. Fane was consulted about the proper performance of these rituals, and she acted the part of the *sapai ulu* in a short re-enactment of these rituals. She is pictured on the front page of the website, next to John Kilatu who took the role of *aliki* ("chief"), in a performance for the prime minister who can be seen between them in the background.

She was an accomplished composer of songs. She had a major role in the song composition session in 1981 described in the preceding chapter. At her goodbye party when she left Sikaiana in 1982, many mature adults, both men and women, gathered to sing traditional songs well into the night. It was one of the rare occasions when Sikaiana's men sang without the stimulus of drinking fermented toddy. She was the main organizer for the performance of a group of songs that I recorded at Easter, 1982. Many of the atoll's older women gathered at her house to practice in the days preceding that performance.

Like many other Sikaiana, she was involved in several land disputes. She was consulted as the oldest and most knowledgeable member of her lineage. The lineage spokesman was her brother's son, who was also one of her foster sons. Other people consulted her about land matters, although she, like every other Sikaiana, was said to have biases determined by her family's and lineage's interests.

In my own work, Fane was a wonderful source of information. She had witnessed many of the pre-Christian ceremonies and participated in them as an adult. She was patient, and willing to struggle with me as I learned the language. She was willing to admit that she didn't know about some topic or ritual (something that some younger men, who had never witnessed traditional ritual, didn't always do). She often insisted that she would only talk about things that she had seen with her own eyes, reminding me that her statements did not include any hearsay. She emphasized that she could not explain the ritual significance of many events which were known to the chief and other ritual specialists, but not to her.

Like many Sikaiana people, Fane sometimes seemed reluctant to discuss traditional rituals. They had not been practiced for a long time, 50 years by 1980, and some people felt that talking about them might indicate that they were not loyal to the

Christian religion. But as soon as she started talking about these rituals, she became enthusiastic and excited. Once, I was interviewing her while she was at another woman's house, she became excited by recounting the fun that people used to experience at one of the traditional rituals. A widow listened while she cooked. This widow, although in her 50s, had been brought up after Sikaiana's conversion to Christianity and had attended mission schools. In disbelief, this widow commented, "Koutou ni hakammate ki na mea ppio" which can be roughly translated as "you (old people) really put a lot of effort into all that bullshit." Both Fane and another older woman, Tekohu, immediately got very agitated, simultaneously exclaiming that the woman had never seen these ceremonies and could not possibly understand the thrill experienced at performing them.

Fane provided me with much of my data about traditional life, including ceremonies, romance, magic, and legends. She also talked to me about present-day romance, kinship, fosterage, and land tenure. She helped me collect songs and explained their metaphors and hidden meanings.

Sikaiana is essentially an egalitarian society. But I sometimes got the sense that there was something aristocratic in Fane's bearing, perhaps because she was a descendant of one of the chiefly clans and a foster daughter of Sikaiana's last traditional chief. Other older women often enjoyed telling obscene jokes. Fane might laugh at their jokes but she was usually too proper to tell such jokes in my presence. I sometimes had the suspicion that she felt partly responsible for my welfare, a Sikaiana version of *noblesse oblige*. In traditional Sikaiana society, the chiefs had certain powers over strangers and immigrants, who were referred to as their *tonu*. They could kill them, take them under their protection, or assign them to another lineage. As the oldest member of a chiefly clan, Fane may have felt responsible for my welfare as an outsider.

Our conversations were my glimpse of a former Sikaiana life which had faded. She described rituals and ceremonies that will never be performed again. She told me the story of Peia, the woman driven crazy by an angry ancestral spirit. She recalled the various types of love magic which men of former times used in order to help them seduce women. She described the atoll's various traders in the early part of this century. She told me about the day, before the arrival of Christian missionaries, when all the ritual houses were destroyed.

Sometimes when we talked, I would experience a peculiar nostalgia about our changing worlds, and how Fane's life and my own had become intertwined. She was probably a little younger than my grandfather, who was born in 1888, but their lives overlapped. My grandfather was working his way through college to learn engineering when Fane was exchanging copra at Svensen's trade store. He was working in the Navy Department under Franklin Roosevelt during World War I at about the same time that Fane was maturing, entering into romances, and participating in the traditional rituals that ensured the atoll's welfare. In 1921, at about the same time that Fane was having her children, my grandfather's only child, my mother, was born. By the time of World War II, most Western institutions had been established on Sikaiana: the church, court, school and council. Fane's grandchildren were raised in these institutions. My

grandfather was well into his career as an engineer, nearing retirement. The worlds of Fane and my grandfather, which started very far apart, ended up much closer.

I visited Fane in Honiara during 1982 while she was in the hospital. Her relatives had insisted that she leave Sikaiana to get medical treatment. She seemed tired but not too sick. I returned to Sikaiana a little later. One Friday afternoon in July, I walked over to Uriel's household. Laumani was recounting a dream she had just had. Before falling asleep, she had been working on a mat, and it was late in the afternoon. She felt drowsy and lay down to take a short nap. She had fallen into a short but very deep sleep. As she slept, she dreamed that a coffin was being lowered into a grave. This type of dream is not uncommon among the Sikaiana and is taken as a forewarning of the impending death of a loved one. As is typical in these Sikaiana dreams, the identity of the person was not revealed but it was assumed that a close relative would soon die.

Once before Laumani had the same experience. On a boat trip from Honiara to Sikaiana, she fell into a deep sleep and dreamed of a coffin being lowered into a grave. When the boat arrived on Sikaiana, she learned that an elder member of her mother's lineage had recently died. At the time Laumani recounted this dream, she did not say whom she suspected would die, although later she told me she suspected her father's mother, a sickly woman who lived on Sikaiana. Several times before I had some Sikaiana predict impending death, sometimes after hearing the call of a certain bird, or after some unusual event such as a fish tail which keeps flapping after the fish has been caught many hours earlier. At first, I was curious to see if anything ever happened following these premonitions but throughout my first year nothing happened that could be correlated with them.

On the following Sunday morning, we received a message broadcast on the national radio that Fane had just died in Honiara. Fane's deceased younger sister was Laumani's mother.

### KILATU

If Fane took me into the past, John Kilatu was the bridge between that past and the present. Kilatu had witnessed the pre-Christian, traditional life as a young boy, and then had been among the first Sikaiana to go away to mission schools. He was fluent in English and also was interested in the traditional culture.

Kilatu was born before records were kept on Sikaiana. The missionaries told him that he looked about ten years old when he started school in 1930. He went to the missionary school with the second group of young men to leave Sikaiana. He was a very good student, although he told me that he was reluctant to return to school after one of his vacation visits to Sikaiana. He finished the missionary school at Pawa in 18 months (the normal time is three or four years).

In 1940 he was sent by the mission to Tulagi, then the administrative center of the Solomon Islands, to work as a clerk for the government. In 1942, when the Japanese

began bombing Tulagi, he moved with other officials to Auki in Malaita, and eventually to Vila in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu). From 1942 to 1944 he worked for the British in Vila and later in Santo.

He had very good relations with Americans there, and I sometimes wondered if his unselfish aid to me was partly a result of these experiences. He said that some American servicemen had recommended that he think about attending medical school in Fiji. There was a delay in receiving permission as letters were sent back and forth between British officials in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. In 1944 he was sent to the medical school in Fiji. In 1949 he finished his education there and returned to the Solomon Islands. The course Kilatu took was designed to train Solomon Islanders in medical skills. Although not as highly trained as British or American medical doctors, these medical officers can treat most diseases, write prescriptions, and perform simple operations.

By the time he had finished his education, he had been away from the atoll for eleven years, although he told me that the time seemed to go very fast. Unlike some students, he told me that he didn't suffer from homesickness. During this leave on Sikaiana, he fell in love with a woman and married her. Unlike Fane whose marriage was arranged, Kilatu, like most others of his generation, chose his marriage partner. He returned with his new wife to Honiara, the new capital built out of the scrap of the American military installations near Henderson Airfield. For the next 25 years he worked as a doctor at various assignments in different parts of the Solomon Islands.

At the time of my stay, Kilatu had retired and was living in a house at one end of the main path along Hale, the main islet. The house belonged to a relative, but he lived there because she rarely came to Sikaiana. His household included some foster children, a son and daughter-in-law, and several daughters.

Nearby, his invalid brother, other relatives and foster children lived in a house that belonged to him. His oldest four children (two sons and two daughters) were all married and working elsewhere in the Solomon Islands. Two younger sons, not yet mature, were living away from Sikaiana with their foster parents.

Kilatu received a retirement pension of several hundred dollars a month, making him wealthy by Sikaiana standards. He moved back and forth between Sikaiana and Honiara where he had a house that was being maintained by his son. At one point he spent a long period of time in Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita. (This was very lucky for me because I was in Auki at the same time working on a dictionary for which he was my main collaborator.)

Kilatu gave me a big break in my fieldwork. I had been in the Solomon Islands for about eight months, most of the time on Sikaiana. I was frustrated by my progress in learning the language. Most Sikaiana were speaking Pijin to me, and although I could understand some Sikaiana, there was a lot that I couldn't understand. I was beginning to feel settled, but I still felt uncertainty in my relationships with many people. One evening after church service, perhaps sensing my frustration or simply out of a

willingness to help, he stopped by my house and offered to work with me on the language. Several days later I took him up on his offer.

Kilatu helped ease a dilemma I was facing in my field research. I don't know about other anthropologists, but my fieldwork involved not only deciding what areas of life to investigate, but also how to handle the people who provided information. How should informants be reciprocated for their help? Fieldwork takes time, and the Sikaiana are busy with their daily work. I had been given the impression by some Sikaiana people that a linguist and an anthropologist who had previously done field research on Sikaiana had paid local assistants. Some people would have been happy if I had hired them. But I was very reluctant to rely upon an assistant or to begin paying cash for help with my research. Hiring anyone as an assistant would alienate people with interests opposed to my assistant's. Moreover, I would feel awkward about paying certain people without paying others. Should I pay Fane for the many afternoons when we conversed? If I paid her, would everybody have to be paid every time I asked a question or sat down to chat. These are decisions that have to be made by all anthropologists. I don't believe that there is a right or wrong way to handle this problem. There are choices and the anthropologist has to live with their consequences. The problem is that many of these choices have to be made before the anthropologist knows enough about the social system to be able to make a reasonable assessment about what those consequences will be.

The Sikaiana have a term for a feeling of 'unfairness', *toonu*. *Toonu* describes the resentment of people who diligently work, for example, on the church or school, while others get away with simply loafing about. Another term, *kaimeo*, describes the envy of unfairness felt when someone else gets a special present or reward. For example, if a parent gives one child a present but ignores another, the latter will feel *kaimeo*. (It was Kilatu who first explained these terms to me.) The Sikaiana are always comparing one another's contributions to projects and the return on these contributions. A consistent theme in their faery tales (*tala*) concerns the unequal distribution of food and its unhappy consequences. I suspect that some of my interactions caused feelings of *toonu* and *kaimeo*. At that time, and still in retrospect, I think hiring assistants would have made matters worse.

Nevertheless, I needed someone who could give me a lot of time to work on specific details of the language. Kilatu's willingness to help didn't solve all the problems of how to reciprocate informants, but it eased a lot of them. Kilatu was wealthy by Sikaiana standards. He didn't need money, and in one case where I offered him some for work on the dictionary, he refused to accept it. He was respected by almost everyone and most Sikaiana accepted him as a knowledgeable and reliable source. He was retired, and although an avid fisherman, he had some time to spare. He had a genuine interest in recording Sikaiana traditions. Finally, since he was fluent in English and had witnessed the traditional culture as a youth, he was a fantastic person to work with.

Kilatu liked to spend time at Muli Akau, the islets at the Western end of the reef, partly because the fishing was better there. One of the happiest times during my stay on Sikaiana took place when he invited me to spend a week with him out there. We went

fishing almost every day, although I was more of a hindrance than a help. After fishing, we returned, washed up and ate fresh fish. Then, with his invalid elder brother, we talked about traditional and contemporary Sikaiana social life. One day he showed me how to cut and drill a necklace of pearl shell. I sent the necklace to my mother as a Christmas present. Although she never wears it, I think of it as the nicest present that I have ever given anyone.

Like me at the time, he chain-smoked (**many years ago I quit**). Although, I sometimes liked to smoke manufactured cigarettes, he almost always preferred twist tobacco rolled in copybook paper. He kept tobacco and precisely cut paper in a metal capsule with a screw cap. He punctuated our conversations by periodically picking up the capsule and placing it before me with a firm tap. For some reason, perhaps because his container kept the tobacco fresh, perhaps because of his company, his tobacco always tasted the best.

He drank only moderately because of his age and health. Unlike most other drinkers he did not drink from a shared cup as part of a large group; rather he kept a separate cup in order to control his intake. I was told though that, when he was younger, he was a much heavier and rowdier drinker.

More than any other person, he taught me the Sikaiana language. Although he was one of the men who spoke English the best, Kilatu was willing to speak Sikaiana with me even when I was first learning it. I collected terms from him that formed the basis for a dictionary. We would list all the different plants on Sikaiana and then the different words used to describe them as they blossomed and matured. He drew maps of the reef and gave me the words for locations, directions, and depths. We collected all the terms for fishing techniques.

He helped me transcribe and translate many of the tape recordings that I collected from Reuben, Fane and others. He patiently helped me work through Sikaiana grammar, giving me derivations for most Sikaiana verbs, and working on various derivational frames that I was using to analyze the grammar. I never would have tried to write a dictionary without his help. He provided new terms and derivations, and he completely checked several versions of the manuscript (Donner 1988a). The dictionary on the website is a result of this effort.

There were times when my presence probably became more tiring than exciting for him. Generally, his wife did not become involved in our work, although if she was present, he would occasionally call out questions to her. At the end of one long day, we were in his house in Honiara. Some Gilbertese visitors had come and left. After they left, Kilatu engaged in metaphorical speech by commenting "na lloo ku llee," "the ants have flown away," referring to the Gilbertese as ants. Such metaphors are often used in speech by the Sikaiana both to enrich and camouflage meaning. His wife, who probably underestimated my ability in the language and familiarity with Sikaiana use of metaphor to hide meanings, replied "*te nei, kaina e te moko ppili*," "now, we are being bitten by the gecko." In Solomon Island's households, there are often small geckos or lizards which crawl along the walls and ceilings. The Sikaiana call them, *moko ppili* `sticking

lizards', because they are able to hold to the wall and ceilings. I was being referred to as the "sticking lizard," an occupational hazard for an anthropologist.

It is hard to imagine what my understanding of Sikaiana would have been without him. I interviewed him about song composition, culture change, kinship relations, and land tenure. Indeed, whenever possible, I tried to check my observations about Sikaiana culture with him. Fane had a fuller knowledge of pre-Christian Sikaiana culture. But Kilatu remembered some things about the traditional culture he had learned from older men, especially his wife's father. Moreover, he had insight into the social changes that took place during his lifetime.

Because of his comparative wealth, his success, his ability as a doctor, and his willingness to help people, Kilatu was an influential man on Sikaiana. In true Sikaiana fashion, he rarely tried to directly force his will or opinion on other people but his opinions carried weight.

Kilatu was a remarkable person. He had been born in a culture believing in spirits and yet he had been very successful in the Western world. He wanted to try to maintain Sikaiana traditions, especially in language, dance, and songs; but, he also encouraged people to continue schooling. Although successful, wealthy and influential, he was not arrogant. Like so many other Sikaiana people, he seemed to find something of worth in almost every Sikaiana, no matter what they had done in their lives. For him, the man who had spent his life on Sikaiana tending to gardens and fishing could be as admirable as the man who had been successful at school and now wealthy. In Kilatu's relations with me (and in my observations of his relations with others), he was always extremely kind and generous of his time, opinion, food, and tobacco. But he was also forceful, neither obsequious nor deferential. He had opinions and he was not afraid to express them. He sternly corrected me if I made a mistake in paddling the canoe when we were fishing; and he would also correct my grammar and challenge my surmises about Sikaiana culture.

In 1986 after Sikaiana was devastated by the cyclone, Kilatu was staying in Honiara and his wife was on Sikaiana. Kilatu, I am told, had a stroke worrying about his wife. About two months before I returned to Sikaiana in 1987, I received a message from some of the Sikaiana that John Kilatu had died on Sikaiana.

Maybe more adventuresome than any of Malinowski's famous Trobriand kula traders, I consider Kilatu to be a true argonaut of the Western Pacific.

#### BROWN SAUA

Fane was about two generations older than myself, Kilatu was approximately my parents' age. Brown Saua was about my age.

Brown's great-grandparents came from Ontong Java, and for this reason he sometimes speaks of himself as being only "half" Sikaiana, even though only his father's

father was pure Ontong Java and the rest of his ancestry is Sikaiana. In Brown's youth, following a bitter quarrel about whether rights to land could be transferred through a woman, his father went to live on Ontong Java where he eventually died.

Brown attended the primary school on Sikaiana, the mission's school at Maravovo, and then with several other Sikaiana men, he became among the first from Sikaiana to attend the government's new and modern secondary school, King George VI, in Honiara. From there he went to the University of the South Pacific in Suva, Fiji. For a time, following in Kilatu's footsteps, he wanted to study medicine. After a few years, he left school to help his family without completing his degree and returned to the Solomon Islands.

He began work in the Protectorate government at the time that it was planning to localize its administration by transferring positions and responsibility from British colonial administrators to Solomon Islanders. He rose rapidly through the ranks of the government service.

The Sikaiana believe that certain traits run in family lines and Brown's family was noted for being intelligent. Brown has three brothers, all of them with advanced education: one is a lawyer; another has a certificate in forestry; a third works as an accountant.

At the time of my arrival in 1980 when I met him in the trailer, Brown was working on government legislation to decentralize political power to the provinces (the Solomon Islands has a federal system with locally administered provinces something like Canada and the United States). The Solomon Islands had just become independent in 1978, and the government was trying to reorganize its administrative system. The national government wanted a decentralized political system with as much power and control as possible to be delegated to the provinces.

During my stay in 1980-83, Brown was promoted several times to high positions in the government administration. After I left in 1983, he was promoted to the position of Permanent Secretary in various government ministries. This is the highest civil service position in the Solomon Islands. In his various postings, he worked hard and tried to be fair and humanitarian. Solomon Islanders and other foreigners who worked with him described him as one of the most capable administrators in the government. He also was courageous enough to take unpopular stands if he thought they were the right ones. He has the respect of many people in and out of government.

When I first arrived in Honiara, I wanted to explain my project to as many Sikaiana people as possible. I was told by many Sikaiana that Brown was an influential person among the Sikaiana, and I was interested in winning his support. He was interested, but initially kept some distance from me. In retrospect, I think he didn't want to become too closely associated with me for fear of biasing my research. As he warned me when we first met, there are many factions on Sikaiana. If I had close friends, I risked acquiring their enemies. But he kept an eye on me and several times helped me. On Sikaiana, his mother, Temotu, probably at his instigation, washed my

clothing, cooked food, and provided advice. Later in my stay, when I was living in Honiara and Auki, I stayed with him and his family. I spent almost all of my stay in 1987 with him and again my short stay of a few weeks in 1993.

Brown moved several times during my stay, and different people lived in his household depending upon where he was residing. At the time of my arrival in 1980, he had three children. Two more children were born during my stay in 1980-1983, one after I left in 1983, and another after I left in 1987. Probably as a result of his comparative wealth, influence, and generosity, all of his children have been taken by foster parents at one time or another. His oldest son was fostered by his wife's father. His next son lived with Laumani and Uriel on Sikaiana (every month a box of snacks arrived with the boat). His third child, a daughter, was taken by his wife's sister. His fourth child, another daughter, was taken by his mother, Temotu, and her own sixteen-year-old foster daughter. Another son was fostered by his wife's mother's sister. He saw his oldest son and daughter on weekends when his in-laws visited Honiara. His mother went back and forth between Honiara, Auki and Sikaiana bringing Brown's second daughter on her visits. He also had two foster children, a boy and a girl, who stayed with him (in 1987 he had taken another foster child). Many other people lived with him from time to time, including myself, Kilatu, his brothers, and others.

Brown often proposed projects and development plans that he thought would help Sikaiana. In 1980-81, he tried to organize a way for the Sikaiana people to acquire land for a resettlement village. He led several meetings to discuss this plan in Honiara and, during his vacation, on Sikaiana. Later, when the local cooperative store on Sikaiana went bankrupt, he organized a committee to oversee it. He also reorganized its finances so that, although the store still didn't become very profitable, it was at least possible to understand its book-keeping system.

When I returned in 1987, he was an active member of a committee that helped plan projects to alleviate the effects of the cyclone on Sikaiana. He was not the chairman of this committee, but the meetings were held at his house. Even though he tried not to take a leading role, claiming that he had too many other responsibilities, no Sikaiana activity was planned without consulting him and enlisting his support. When a fundraising event was planned to be held at the Sikaiana settlement at Tenaru Beach outside of Honiara, the chairman of the committee asked Brown to make the arrangements with the families at Tenaru. The chairman explained that the activity would have legitimacy if it had Brown's support; otherwise people would be skeptical. At his own initiative, Brown planned an application for a special housing project to replace housing destroyed on Sikaiana during the 1986 cyclone.

Brown was an influential leader of the Sikaiana in the sense that he would organize meetings, explain policies and plans. But like other influential Sikaiana people he did not try to force his opinion or will on others. Rather, he organized meetings and tried to reach a consensus. Like Kilatu, he was influential without being coercive.

He also was involved in national activities. He was chairman of the Solomon Islands Olympic Committee and traveled abroad for regional meetings in preparation

for the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, to which the Solomon Islands sent a small team.

I rarely heard him say anything bad about another Sikaiana person, and unlike many other Sikaiana, he rarely gossiped or criticized. When he was drinking, I never saw him get into a fight, nor did he have a reputation for fighting in his youth, somewhat uncommon for Sikaiana people who can be volatile when drinking.

Brown, like Kilatu, was interested in preserving Sikaiana traditions. He had recorded some traditional songs, and on one occasion before my arrival in 1980, he organized a traditional song festival. In proposing his plan for a resettlement village, he emphasized that it was important for the Sikaiana to be able to reside together in order to preserve their traditions. Like many other Sikaiana, though, he was also interested in assimilating Western values and institutions. He supported economic development, and, even more than I do, subscribed to a notion of "progress," believing that life in the Solomon Islands will get improved technology and the standard of living of will increase. When his children became old enough to start school, he insisted that they be returned from their foster families so that he could oversee their schooling in Honiara.

He also maintained his ties with other Sikaiana people. Brown married a Sikaiana woman and he is committed to his Sikaiana kinship ties. He often used his yearly leave to return to Sikaiana. In Honiara, he was an active participant in Sikaiana events.

Fane and Kilatu were at the end of their lives when I knew them. They had grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and although their lives were not without challenges, decisions, joys and sorrows, they had some sense of completeness. They were both retired. Fane died in 1982; Kilatu died shortly before my return in 1987. Brown, by contrast, was in mid-career. For the entire time that I knew him, he has been in the midst of making choices and decisions about his work, family and future.

When I returned to the Solomon Islands in 1987, there were changes in Brown's life. After being promoted to a Permanent Secretary (the highest non-elected position in a Westminster type of government), he had resigned to work for a private company. He had various reasons for resigning. He came to be frustrated by some of the infighting in the government bureaucracy. He spent long hours under pressure for pay and benefits that were considerably less than those he received working in the private sector. Like many business people in industrial societies, he had become a vocal advocate of free enterprise and an opponent of government bureaucracies for their inefficiency and waste. He proudly described how he had to be efficient and profitable in his new job. He often teased two of his brothers who were working for the government with examples of governmental inefficiency.

His job with the government was secure, well paying, and influential. He left it to work with a private company where he spent his first six months learning a completely new job. It was a risk because the company's Australian owners were interested in profits. If Brown couldn't bring them in, someone else would be hired. After about a year, he had mastered his job and proved his ability to his new bosses. He was once

again relatively secure, but he felt that he would have more freedom if he went into business on his own. By the time I was ready to leave in late 1987, he was already making plans to start his own business.

When I returned again in 1993, Brown was working for a national development organization. He was once again using his administrative skills but this time in an organization which was not part of the government bureaucracy.

Brown was never as directly involved in the details of my research as either Fane or Kilatu. I talked with him about certain issues, and he reviewed parts of my dictionary. But I did not take information from him as often as I did from Kilatu, Fane, or even many other Sikaiana. Instead, Brown provided me with the kind of emotional and personal support that made my stay much easier. He was a very good friend.<sup>i</sup>

### SIMON TOKULAA

My relationship with Tokulaa was quite different from the three I have just described. I interviewed him once to ask him about his family background and work history, the interview which I gave to everyone. I spent less time with him than with Fane, Kilatu or Brown. But he stands out in my memory as an unforgettable person.

Tokulaa was a character; he was a Sikaiana cynic.

My first encounter with him was not pleasant. I hadn't been on Sikaiana too long and was with a group of people drinking toddy. As usual, Tokulaa was drinking and drunk. He began insulting me: Why had I come to live on Sikaiana? Why didn't I go back to wherever I came from? In any case, he said matter-of-factly and with an annoying touch of satisfaction, the Sikaiana people will "skin you like a pig," meaning that they would take advantage of me. I had not yet encountered such hostility from any Sikaiana, who are rarely so direct in their criticism, especially to foreigners, and more especially to Westerners.

I was upset and for the next few months I avoided him. He was the priest's nephew and they lived in the same house. Despite our quarrel, and probably at the instigation of the priest with whom he lived, Tokulaa one day shyly asked me to buy him some small rubber fish that are used as lures. I was planning to return to Honiara for a few months. These lures are rare on Sikaiana and hard to come by in Honiara where they are sold in only a few stores. Such direct requests are rare from Sikaiana because people are afraid that they will be ridiculed for begging. Normally, I would have ignored them. It is not a good idea, in my opinion, to develop relationships based upon gifts. Reciprocity, however, is the basis of many social relations on Sikaiana; they often define their relations in terms of visible exchanges. I was curious about Tokulaa, who seemed friendly but shy on those few occasions when he was sober. I decided to look for the lures when I got to Honiara. After a long search through most of Honiara's shops, I finally found a small store in Chinatown which sold them in packs of five for less than a dollar. The search was much more bothersome than the cost. When I returned to

Sikaiana I had a pack of lures for Tokulaa.

He became much friendlier after this small gift and in the following months, we began drinking and joking together. One day he suggested we go together to Matuavi, one of the far islets at the other end of the lagoon. He said it was "fresh" there; Hale, the main islet was over-developed and polluted, by comparison. (It is true that Hale is dirtier and more littered as the result of daily use. I found it amusing that on their seemingly remote and isolated island some Sikaiana people like "to get away from it all" by going to these outer islands.) We took off for several days. Although Tokulaa never went to church, his uncle and housemate, the priest had asked him to bring back a new giant clam shell to be used for Baptisms in the church. He dove for the clam and we spent the next day slowly drilling a hole in it with a hand drill.

Tokulaa was a bachelor in his late forties. A bachelor on Sikaiana is often the object of derision. The one thing that the Sikaiana value is marriage and reproduction. Among the most constant and heaviest drinkers on the atoll, he drank toddy almost every day, and sometimes for several days in a row. He was one of the few Sikaiana people who never went to church, although he lived with the priest.

Sometimes, he had a nasty temper. One night at a dance, without any apparent provocation, he punched another man squarely in the face. The other man was himself an old bachelor, partly blind, at times obnoxious, but in this case, he was simply trying to dance with some of the women. Later, Tokulaa claimed to have been too drunk to remember the incident.

When drinking, Tokulaa often boasted to me that he was the most capable man on Sikaiana in constructing houses, fishing and building a canoe. I was doubtful. When drunk, Sikaiana men often boast, and a lot of the time Tokulaa was drunk. I very rarely saw him sober, except when he was building a concrete house for which his services would later be paid with drink. I somehow couldn't imagine this drunkard being much good at anything.

Tokulaa's words were more than bluster. On the trip to Matuavi, I went in his canoe and it was a very exceptional one, the only if its kind that I had been in. His canoe was very narrow. By that time, I had become used to sitting in the narrow Sikaiana canoes, but his canoe hurt my hips and rear. It was very light with very thin sides. Such construction is uncomfortable for sitting and not very practical for hauling copra. Broad-bottomed, shallow hulls are better for that. It takes both nerve and skill to shape a canoe with such thin sides. One slight slip of the hand when making the canoe and the side will be perforated. The narrow and thin shape, however hard to fashion, makes a canoe that is very fast. It was not very stable, which required adept steering, and it would not tolerate scraping against the coral. It showed gifted workmanship, but lacked practicality for transporting people and supplies. Tokulaa's canoe was something like the Sikaiana version of a Porsche, fast, delicate, and skillfully crafted, but not practical for much of the work that a family man must do.

He was a skilled carpenter and had worked away from Sikaiana. On Sikaiana, he

supervised most of the construction of houses with concrete foundations. He was proud that none of his house foundations ever cracked. I fully appreciated his skill when I returned to Sikaiana in 1987. He had died, probably of pneumonia, during my absence. Two solid houses built by him were standing, both having withstood the effects of the cyclone. No new concrete buildings were being started because, although there were some former carpenters on Sikaiana, no one felt competent to supervise them. A new medical clinic remained an unfinished frame for a year because no one had the confidence to put up the walls. If Tokulaa had been alive, all these projects would have been completed.

Tokulaa was a cynical philosopher. He constantly described Sikaiana as a "bad luck place" with no resources, nothing to build upon, no potential for development. And yet after we became friends, Tokulaa kept telling me to stay there for the rest of my life. He insisted that I could learn the skills necessary for survival. He was convinced that life in America consisted of two things: violence and greed. He explained both with dramatics: pointing his hand into a gun with his forefinger and thumb and saying "ping"; and then rolling his forefinger and thumb into a ring to make a circle to represent a coin.

Tokulaa was not a primary informant, like Fane or Kilatu, and I never knew him as well as I knew Brown. Like everyone else I had contact with, I recorded some aspects of our interactions, especially as they pertained to topics I was researching. I never would have understood about certain skills in canoe construction except for having sat in his fast, but uncomfortable canoe. His discussions about social change made their way into my notes where they were blended with less cynical views about both Westernization and life on the atoll.

There was something I liked about Tokulaa. Tokulaa had a certain dignity in his cynicism. Philosophical and introspective in a religious society, Tokulaa never went to church. A skilled carpenter with a marketable trade, he most often worked his trade in exchange for fermented toddy. A capable man both in traditional skills and in Western ones, he never did the one thing necessary to become respected by other Sikaiana: he never married. Equally a cynic about Sikaiana life and Western life, he, nevertheless, advised me to spend the rest of my life on the atoll.

#### SALLY TOLOTI (a pseudonym)

Of all the people in this chapter, I had the least interaction with Sally, although I do know some members of her family well. I lived in the house of one of her older brothers for several months, and on Sikaiana often drank with a younger brother. I saw her at the Christmas holiday on Sikaiana in 1981 and occasionally at Sikaiana events in Honiara or when she visited relatives. Sally was less involved in Sikaiana activities than any of the people discussed so far. She lived in Honiara and married a man with mixed Caucasian ancestry.

When I returned to the Solomon Islands in 1987, I wanted to collect life histories. I asked people to talk about their lives and careers, and recorded their responses into a

tape-recorder. I was interested in interviewing Sally because I knew that she was one of the few Sikaiana women who has a profession. She is a teacher. One afternoon, she shyly consented to an interview and then in Pijin, which after many years in Honiara she claimed to be more comfortable speaking, she described some important events in her life.

Sally represents another perspective on Sikaiana life. She is a woman who, against her parents' wishes, received an education and, again contrary to their wishes, married a non-Sikaiana man. She continues to work at her profession, although her husband's job provides her household with a very good income. She has done things that most Sikaiana women don't do and she has been successful at them.

Sally was born shortly after World War II. When she was young, she was raised on Sikaiana by her foster parents. Her father and mother lived in Honiara. She recalled that at the time of her youth, the school on Sikaiana was open only for the young boys because a woman's education was not considered as important.

The Anglican missionaries encouraged the girls to get their schooling at mission schools away from Sikaiana. But Sally's foster parents wanted to keep her with them and would not allow her to leave the atoll to go to school. Her younger sister, raised in a different household, left for school before she did. Sally was envious of the other girls who went to school and who returned to the atoll speaking some English.

When she was about eleven, her father returned to Sikaiana and agreed to let her attend the mission school at Pamua on Makira Island. She attended school there from 1957 to 1959. At first, she was frightened by the new surroundings. She had never spoken any language except the Sikaiana vernacular and had never seen Melaneseans before. But she eventually made many friends and impressed her teachers with her intelligence. Her teachers liked her and she liked school.

She returned to her parents' household in 1960 for her Christmas break. Her father decided that she had enough schooling and refused to allow her to go back. With a short laugh during the interview, she said that he must have thought that if she learned how to write her name then that was as much education as any Sikaiana woman needed. She wrote a letter to her school asking the teachers to see if they could persuade her father to change his mind. The teachers asked Sikaiana's priest to write her father a letter trying to persuade him to send her back. But like a lot of Sikaiana parents then, **and even at the time of the interview in 1987**, her father did not think that educating his daughters was so important and would not change his mind.

She gave up any hope of returning to Pamua. But after a delay her father changed his mind and she returned to school by Easter. She finished school at Pamua and was selected to go on to the new teachers' training college. She and one other woman were the first females who went to the school. She finished her courses there in 1967 and then went to Fiji for nine months of special training.

She returned to Pamua to teach for two years and then decided to marry a non-

Sikaiana man. Her parents opposed the marriage. Probably, like most Sikaiana parents, they wanted her to marry another Sikaiana person (although they have another daughter married to a man from another country). Again, she overcame their objections. Her husband worked first for the Church of Melanesia and then started a career in the civil service. She travelled with him to his various postings: Gizo in the Western Province; Auki in Malaita Province; Kirakira in Makira Province; Santa Cruz; Tulagi; and then finally back to Honiara. Whenever possible she took a job as a school teacher. Her husband became influential in the civil service and in the government.

She told me that her marriage to a non-Sikaiana person has caused her to become distanced from other Sikaiana people. They don't ask her to participate in their ceremonies and events. Her children can understand the Sikaiana vernacular, but cannot speak it. She feels sorry for the Sikaiana women who don't get a good education. If they move away from the atoll, they can't find work and then they have to stay around the house. They also have trouble mixing with other non-Sikaiana Solomon Islanders. Their husbands, who are educated, can interact with other Solomon Islanders. She recalled the time at Pamua when she and other Sikaiana school girls imagined going back to Sikaiana and starting a school for girls.

Her husband has a good job with the government and her children are all doing well in school. In the interview she explained, "I'm not really just working for money any longer, I like my work. If I stay at the house-- I could do it for two or three months-- but then I would feel restless. I'm always thinking I should quit my job, but then I think about how much I like the work. I like the work. I like the children I teach. Sometimes the children make you tired, but still they can make you happy."

## **Diversity**

There is no individual who would serve as typical of all Sikaiana. But the Sikaiana people do share a common cultural tradition and history that shapes their lives. Brown's optimism and Tokulaa's cynicism can be understood as different responses to similar historical and cultural processes.

The five people described above are examples of the range of diversity among individual Sikaiana. No one was as old as Fane and by 1987 there were no longer any surviving people who witnessed pre-Christian social and ritual life as adults. Unlike Fane, most Sikaiana are fluent in Pijin; unlike Kilatu and Brown, most are not fluent in English. Many people have less interest in traditional customs and ceremonies than Fane, Kilatu or Brown, but probably more interest than Tokulaa. Most Sikaiana like to drink, but most thought Tokulaa was excessive.

Although many older people attended the missionary schools, Maravovo and Pawa, unlike Kilatu they did not go to medical school. Instead, most men of Kilatu's age returned to Sikaiana or stayed abroad working as electricians, carpenters, crew

members of boats, clerks, and school teachers. Most younger people have less education than Brown, although many have spent some time abroad receiving specialized training. Most women do not have as much education as Sally, and very few work in the professions.

On the atoll, Tokulaa was at a margin in community life because he was unmarried. But Tokulaa was liked by many Sikaiana and, if not admired, at least tolerated by all others. Moreover, he was capable in Sikaiana skills as a canoe maker, fisherman, and house builder. Sally, a resident of Honiara and married to a non-Sikaiana person, is at another margin. She visits with other Sikaiana people and participates in some of their activities, but her children do not speak the language and she feels some distance between herself and other Sikaiana.

Like all Sikaiana, these five people are tied to one another through overlapping networks of kinship, personal commitments and obligations. Kilatu and Fane had entered into a ceremonial "friendship" with each other, and invited one another to events and parties. Fane's foster child, her brother's grandson, married Kilatu's daughter. This couple resided with Fane following their wedding. Fane and Kilatu closely collaborated in the performance of a traditional ceremony for the visit of the Prime Minister. Fane showed Kilatu how to dress in the role of traditional chief, *aliki*, when she took the role of the chief's assistant, *sapai ulu*. When Kilatu resided in Auki for a conference of the Malaita Diocese of the Church of Melanesia, he stayed with Brown. Brown's grandparents were closely associated with Fane's lineage, after they migrated to Sikaiana from Ontong Java. This association was still important at the time of my stays. Brown's family was encouraged to use Fane's lineage land and maintained close ties with her lineage. One of Brown's foster children is the great-granddaughter of Fane and the granddaughter of Kilatu. Sally's mother was a member of Fane's land-holding lineage and her parent's house on Sikaiana was located near Fane's. Sally's foster mother was a close relative of Brown's mother, Temotu. Brown's wife was the foster child of Sally's parents. Sally's brother, Frank was one of Brown's closest friends and, for a while, they were in business together. Tokulaa was a member of Kilatu's clan and a member of Brown's wife's land-holding lineage. When Brown's father-in-law built a concrete house on Sikaiana, he asked Tokulaa to oversee its construction.

The dense and overlapping nature of these relationships is one way in which the Sikaiana are bound together. But the people are not only bound together by the frequency and intensity of interaction and overlapping relationships. In the following chapters, I will describe some of the shared interactional expectations and ceremonies which also unite them.

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<sup>i</sup> Brown had chronic asthma for the entire time that I knew him. He passed away a relatively young man in 1995.