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Chapter 3, Daily Life in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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III

LAND AND SEA: DAILY LIFE ON SIKAIANA

The *Belama* approaches Sikaiana from the southwest, arriving first at Matuavi, the islet located on the southwest corner of the atoll. The boat proceeds around the west side of the reef passing two more islets, Matuiloto and Tehaolei, and then turns east traveling along the north side of the reef on its way to the largest islet, Hale, which is located on the other side of the lagoon.

Sikaiana, although often called an island, is really an atoll. Atolls are mostly seawater and reef. Within a giant circle of reef, there are a few thin little strips dry land which are best described as "islets", rather than islands. If seen from above, Sikaiana looks like a giant oval, broad at one end and narrowed at the other, shaped something like a giant boot or light bulb. The reef is a giant circular strip of rock which forms the circumference of this boot. It is a raised platform barrier of rock which separates the surrounding sea on the outside from the islets and lagoon within. Within the reef's circumference, there are concentric rings of shallower and deeper water and then in the center, there is a large deep-blue lagoon. Along the shallow fringes near to the reef's platform on the atoll's eastern and western ends, there are the four small islets. Hale, the largest, is located in the east at the narrow base of the bulb; Matuavi, Matuiloto, and Tehaolei are located on the western side of the lagoon at the foot of the boot.

That first time I arrived at Sikaiana, and every time since, I have always been overwhelmed by the site of the reef, as the *Belama* pulls alongside it. After travelling across unbroken blues and greens in sea and sky, there is the sudden stretch of solid, brown rock. The atoll is like an oasis of dry land in a desert of ocean. I feel strange and out of place, an insignificant intruder. It is the same feeling that I have when getting out of a disabled car and walking through the underpass of a freeway. For some reason, the atoll, a monument of nature, seems unnatural. Inside the reef's rocky barrier are the four little isolated islets covered with coconut trees, clumps of raised, defiant green life. The world of the reef, so small and fragile in terms of the enormity of the ocean, seems massive, sturdy and protective when close.

Weather permitting, the boat will unload at a small passage called Ohana on the northern side of the reef near Hale, the main islet. There is no passage large enough for the ship to enter inside the lagoon. At low tide even the smallest dugout canoes have to be portaged through the shallow passage between lagoon and ocean. Because the ocean floor falls very sharply from the edge of the reef, ships cannot drop anchor. The *Belama* circles as close to the reef as its captain dares for fear of running ashore. Near the passage, washed up on rocks about 30 yards into the reef are the remains of a yacht whose skipper foolishly anchored for a night alongside the reef. His yacht was carried by the tides onto the top of the reef and he could never free it. The yacht is now a marooned carcass, lying on its side, its paint bleached and peeling, a constant reminder to ships' pilots of the dangers of coming too close to the reef.

As the *Belama* approaches, a line of canoes departs from the shore of Hale,

paddling towards the passage. The water between the passage and the islet is shallow and the canoes follow a meandering channel of slightly deeper water where they will not scrape coral or run aground. At the passage to the ocean, the canoes' passengers disembark. Some people guide their canoes across the shallow passage and head into the waves of the ocean to paddle out to the *Belama*. Others tie their canoes on coral rocks within the reef and wait. A group of people stands at the passage to help the canoes cross the reef into the ocean. The canoes paddle out to the ship and begin unloading supplies and passengers from over the ship's side.

The canoes returning from the *Belama* have to be unloaded at the edge of the passage, guided across its narrow and shallow entrance and then reloaded a little distance into the lagoon before being paddled back to the islet. The work at the passage is frantic. Going out to sea, a canoe must wait for a calm period that follows a series of waves, and then paddlers try to get far enough out not to be swamped by the breaking waves. If a canoe crosses into the ocean out of time with the waves, it might be swamped by the incoming crests of waves. Worst case, it could be thrown back onto the reef, its hull smashed and perhaps its passengers injured. The waves are not high, at most five or six feet, but they dominate Sikaiana's small dugout canoes. Approaching the passage from the ocean, people must steer their canoes to catch a wave into the area of the passage. People standing in the shallow water on either side of the passage, grab hold of the canoe and pull it toward the passage as passengers try to clamber out before another wave breaks from behind and swamps the canoe. The canoe is guided through the passage to the calmness inside the passage where the ocean's waves will not swamp it. The *Belama* has a small fiberglass dinghy which is also used for transport. Shortly after my arrival, its pilot, a crewman of the *Belama* who was not from Sikaiana, misjudged the entrance into the passage. A wave broke on the dinghy's stern, it swamped and then flipped in the whirling wave. Luckily no one was hurt, although a load of supplies were drenched.

The day of the ship's arrival is a busy one. Passengers and their supplies must be taken ashore. Copra must be taken from the shore out to the reef and then loaded onto the ship. Mail is brought to the atoll, some of which must be answered immediately before the *Belama* departs in the evening (there won't be another chance to answer mail for at least another month). Often there is someone who receives a letter with a request from a relative to go to Honiara on the boat's return in the afternoon. He or she must then pack and prepare to go. Visiting government officials hold public meetings during the day. They sometimes summon the Area Committee members, school teachers, medical personnel, or other workers on the atoll.

The Courthouse

The Sikaiana Area Committee is a body of elected people who administer the atoll's local needs and by-laws, much like the council of a small town or borough. They were the body who had rejected earlier proposals for research and had recently approved mine. They had been informed by shortwave radio that I would be arriving on November's boat. They decided I would reside in Sikaiana's courthouse, a building

with a wooden plank floor and a sago thatch roof. Sago palm is very rare on Sikaiana. Most roofs are made from either coconut leaf or imported corrugated iron. This sago leaf and lumber had been sent by Malaita Province to build the court. Unlike most Sikaiana houses which are built on the ground, the courthouse was raised about two feet off the ground and constructed on four firm tree-trunk posts. The walling of the house consisted of wood slats cut from a soft tree which grows on Sikaiana.

Inside was one long room about 30 feet long by 20 feet wide. The wooden planks made a nice, smooth floor. There was a long wooden table which I used as a desk. When the court was in session, the justices sit behind this table. There was a wooden cabinet at one end of the room with one warped door which didn't close tightly. Edwin Huilani, the radio operator whom Jacob could not reach several weeks earlier, brought me a small wooden ladder he had taken from the wrecked yacht and placed it at the entrance. I put a foam mattress and mosquito net in one corner.

The British Protectorate officials started holding court cases on Sikaiana about 60 years earlier. The Protectorate's records of the 1930's and 1940's indicate that administrators heard court cases, often land disputes, as often as they visited, usually once a year. More recently, local justices have been selected from the Sikaiana. They hear minor criminal cases and preliminary hearings on land disputes. The court, however, only held session as often as there were complaints, at most a couple days every few months.

The courthouse is located in a neighborhood or territory named Loto, meaning 'center', appropriately named, for it is the center of the Sikaiana's social life. The church, clinic, cooperative store, and other community buildings are located nearby. Loto is immediately in front of the main ritual sites where, in former times, traditional ceremonies were performed.

The courthouse faces the main village path that follows the shore along the lagoon. Almost every resident of Sikaiana lives in a house along this path which provides convenient access to both the atoll's main institutions and the lagoon. The path extends for about 3/4 of a mile and there are about 50 or 60 houses, some in various stages of development and disrepair spread along it. In most places the path is wide and well swept. I could walk along it in barefoot without trouble; away from its smoothness, I had to barefoot gingerly to avoid pebbles, shell fragments and other debris. Sikaiana people have such deep callouses on their feet that most can walk pretty much everywhere without problem.

Hale, although the largest of the four islets, is small. It is possible to walk the main path past all of Sikaiana's houses in about 10 minutes. I could walk from any one place in the atoll to any other in less than 45 minutes.

Daily and Weekly Life

On the atoll, the daily, weekly and yearly calendars are marked by church

events. The Sikaiana church is the single most influential and pervasive institution in the lives of the people and permeates their daily activities and schedules. There are two church services each day, after sunrise and before sunset. Services are announced by a bell which can be heard from almost anywhere on Hale. (When I talked with Paul Knight, an American Navy flier shot down on Sikaiana in August 1942, one of his most vivid memories was of watching people pass his house as they walked to and from the church service.) Some people, mostly women, go to almost every service, both in the mornings and evenings. Almost the entire population attends Saturday evening service and Sunday communion.

Work is forbidden by the church on Sundays and other Christian holidays. After morning service on Sunday, men sometimes go to the field outside of the school and play soccer. There are also games of volleyball, netball, cricket and dodgeball. Some people play cards, others chat. Because people are prohibited from fishing on Sundays, most men go fishing on Saturdays in order to catch enough fish to last until Monday.

Church holidays are the major festive occasions. These include Christmas, New Years, Easter and the day of St. Andrew, the patron Saint of the Sikaiana church. During these holidays, people are prohibited from performing their normal chores for the week. They are expected to celebrate by singing, dancing, and feasting. People may feed their pigs, harvest crops for daily nourishment, fish, and catch birds. But they may not work on mats, canoes, houses, copra, or gardens. Church holidays are also occasions for drinking fermented coconut toddy.

The church building is the largest and best kept structure on Sikaiana. It is about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. Its walls are about four feet high and made of piled flat stone. Steel poles support the iron roof which arches about 30 feet above ground. The inside is breezy, but rain can't come in. Two aisles separate rows of short wood benches into three sections. Facing the altar, men sit on the left, children in the center, and women on the right.

Most mornings after church service, the medical clinic is open, and people go there to have minor injuries treated or to receive medicine. The biggest medical problem on Sikaiana is malaria (during one epidemic in 1982 about half the population tested positive by a visiting medical team for the parasite). I was always getting cuts on the rough coral, and the dresser treated those that swelled.

Until it was destroyed by a cyclone in 1986, there was a cooperative store which opened for about an hour after the morning and afternoon church services. The store was the main broker for copra on Sikaiana. Members paid a nominal fee to join and were entitled to a share of the store's profits, should there be any. Members sold their copra to the store, which sold it to purchasers in Honiara. (Copra is dried coconut meat which is used in cosmetics. Lever Brothers was a major purchaser of Solomon Islands copra). The money which the store received from these sales was used to purchase goods in Honiara which were then transported to Sikaiana on the *Belama*. Stock varied depending both upon the cooperative store's solvency and the time when the last boat had arrived (there were times when the boat could be several weeks or even months

late). Normally there was twist tobacco, rice, sugar, tea, salt, matches, kerosene (for hurricane lanterns), fishhooks, flour, and tinned meat. Other items that were stocked less frequently include coffee, milo (a chocolate drink), dry milk, cloth, and batteries.

In the morning, women cook a light meal. Sometimes there is fish left over from the day before. Other times bananas are fried. Children like to eat boiled rice mixed with molasses made from coconut sap. Most people drink tea with sugar. Some drop large dry crackers, called navy biscuits, into their tea or coffee-- a soggy breakfast treat which I acquired a taste for. After the children eat, they go off to the local school, which is named Tapuaki, after a spirit formerly believed to have inhabited the area where the school is located.

The men climb trees to collect coconut sap twice each day, once in the morning and once in the evening. Most families keep pigs which must be fed daily. Men and women go to the islet's interior to collect fallen coconuts for feeding the pigs which are penned in areas away from the inhabited part of the atoll. Other ripe coconuts which have fallen to the ground are used to make copra. The green coconuts still hanging on trees are good for drinking, but their flesh has not matured enough to be used for making copra or feeding to pigs.

Women tend their taro gardens. If they have any free time, they plait the coconut leaf mats used in house construction and the finer pandanus mats used for bedding. Men work on construction projects such as housing, canoes, fencing for pigs, or clearing gardens. They also go fishing using a variety of different techniques depending upon the season, tides and each fisherman's preference. Some Sikaiana men are notorious for their enthusiasm for fishing at the expense of projects on land; others are considered to be poor fishermen but more adept at work along shore and in the interior.

People try to complete all their activities by the afternoon church service at about 4:00.

The main diet of the Sikaiana consists of fish, taro, rice and coconuts. A Sikaiana person considers a good meal to include both some kind of meat, usually fish, and another dish, usually taro, rice, or if nothing else is available, coconuts. Taro pudding is sometimes made in underground ovens, although more often the taro is boiled in steel pots. Chicken, pig, birds, occasional flying fox, shellfish, various seasonal fruits and nuts are also eaten. Rice is brought to the atoll, either sent by relatives or purchased in the cooperative store. Tea, sugar, and to a lesser extent flour, are regular staples, again either sent from Honiara or purchased in the cooperative store. Sometimes dry crackers, tinned beef, and even tinned fish are purchased. The fat drippings from pigs are saved in empty kerosene drums and used for frying. Most cooking is done over an open fire, either boiling in pots or frying in pans. The underground ovens, which were the traditional method for cooking and still in use during World War II, were used infrequently during my stay. The Sikaiana people have come to prefer food fried in pig fat.

Imported goods manufactured outside of the Solomon Islands are an important part of the local economy. Every adult has a bush knife. Steel adzes, axes and hammers are used in canoe making, house construction, and garden clearing. Several men own nylon fishing nets. All fishing line is made of manufactured nylon; all fishhooks are manufactured steel. All clothing is made from manufactured materials purchased in stores. Most people wear a simple piece of cloth about six feet long and two feet wide which is wrapped around the body like a sarong. Some men wear pants and short shirts. Some women wear skirts or dresses, especially for the Sunday church service. A few people wear plastic sandals but most walk on heavily calloused bare feet.

Sikaiana has no electricity, although there was a small kerosene generator in the medical clinic to refrigerate medicine. In the evening, light is provided by flashlights, lanterns, and pressure lamps. Many people own portable cassette-radios, and in the evenings, when reception is better, people listen to the national radio station of the Solomon Islands.

Most men own or have access to a canoe. Most of these canoes are made on Sikaiana, carved-out from the trunk of the *pinipini* (most likely *Calophyllum*) tree, the only tree species on Sikaiana that is large enough for a canoe. A few larger canoes are purchased from elsewhere in the Solomon Islands and brought to Sikaiana on the *Belama*. There was one fiberglass boat in 1980. Several more were brought to Sikaiana in 1986 following a cyclone.ⁱ

Water is provided by several manual pumps connected to underground wells. Most people find this water too brackish to drink and use it mainly to wash clothes and bathe. Rainwater is collected from the run-off of corrugated iron roofs and stored in large containers under these roofs. People drink this water. Occasionally, when the atoll has been without rain for a week or longer, the water drums are empty. At such times, people drink coconut milk. But the tanks were rarely out of water and usually only for a short time.

People bathe, defecate and urinate in the ocean. They strongly disapprove of anyone who defecates on dry land because before too long someone is bound to come across it while searching for fallen coconuts or working.

In 1980-1983, about one half of the houses on Sikaiana were made of manufactured materials concrete, walling and roofing iron. The rest were made from local materials, wood and coconut leaf. Most leaf houses are rectangular, about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. Usually, there is a door on the shore side and another facing the inland side. Formerly, doors were to one side of the front wall with a center post supporting the roof. But following the European fashion learned during the Protectorate period, doors are now in the center of the wall. The front and back walling is usually coconut mats. The side walling is about four feet high, made of slats from a tree whose soft wood is cut into thin slices (*Hibiscus*?). The slats are shaped and fit tightly. Some leaf houses use lumber or occasionally a piece of iron roofing to reinforce their walling. Roofs are made of overlapping coconut leaf mats packed tightly on top of each other. Along the front and back of the houses, coconut leaf mats, more closely woven than the

roof mats, are used for walling. Floors are usually coral gravel, often covered by coconut leaf mats.

Other houses have cement foundations, masonite or board walling, and corrugated steel roofs. They are usually about the same size as the leaf houses. Sometimes, their interiors are partitioned into separate rooms. Some floors are completely covered with concrete. Most of these houses have a few holes in their walling which were punched through by some angry drunkard. Some houses with iron roofs have drains which collect the run-off of rain into large metal containers, which store water for drinking.

Inside most Sikaiana houses, people sleep under mosquito nets which are spread out at night and neatly folded into a corner during the day. Some people sleep on plaited pandanus mats, but these are being replaced by the foam mattresses sold in Honiara's stores (less craftsmanship but, to be honest, more comfortable, at least to me). Supplies are stored inside the houses. Some families store food in a screened cabinet where bugs and rats can't get to it. Most people have a few suitcases, wooden and cardboard boxes for storing clothes and other valuables. On wooden shelves and wedged into crevices of walls, there are tools and utensils, and a few articles of clothing. Other items, too good to discard but not of much use, are saved: rusted kerosene lanterns, a sandal, a rubber boot, a broken umbrella, paint brushes, empty rice sacks (used for sending taro or other foods to Honiara), empty kerosene drums. Lines of rope cross the ceiling with things hanging down from them including lamps and clothing. Tucked away somewhere there is always a Bible and prayer book. Some people have pictures on their walls, usually of friends or relatives, scenes from the Bible, or sometimes the British Royal Family.

Kitchens are detached from the houses. Smaller than houses, most are enclosed, often constructed from a patchwork of both bush materials and spare pieces of roofing iron. Inside there is a raised iron grate for holding pots and pans over the cooking hearth. The hearth is set against one wall. An open space between walling and roof provides a little ventilation. There may be a platform or cabinet for storing tea, sugar, and other supplies. Floors are often sand or coral gravel with a few worn mats scattered around. There is usually a low stool for sitting while tending the fire. This stool has other uses. It is oblong with a little nose at one end to which a grater can be attached. Women straddle the chair and use the grater to scrape the flesh of coconuts. Fuel for the fire includes coconut shells, coconut husks, and chopped wood.

LAND and SEA

There are two locations for life on the atoll: the sea and the land. The distinction between these areas are marked by two of the most frequently heard words in the Sikaiana language: *uta*, 'landward' and *tai*, 'seaward'. These are relative terms. The Sikaiana have cardinal terms for directions: "East," "West," "North," "South." But these terms are used very rarely in ordinary speech. Like the sailor who constantly refers to locations in terms of "port," "starboard," "bow" and "stern," the Sikaiana constantly

locate themselves and others in terms of their relative position towards the sea or land.

The Sikaiana person standing at the shore will motion towards the interior of an islet and describe it as "landward," and refer to something toward the ocean by describing it as "seaward." The reef itself is a giant oval between two large bodies of water: the lagoon and the open ocean. The reef is always "landward" from both the lagoon and ocean side. "Seaward" can be opposite directions depending upon where one is standing. Outside the reef, "seaward" is always away from the atoll towards the open ocean; inside the reef, it is always in the opposite direction towards the center of the lagoon. One travels "seaward" towards the center of the lagoon and, when there then all directions are "landward."

The Sikaiana living in Honiara have adapted these terms to their lives there. The business district of Honiara with its stores and market are "seaward," while the suburbs and residential areas away from the business district are "landward." Thus, a Sikaiana person from the suburbs of Honiara will describe going to town as travelling "seaward," and returning home as going "landward," even though the entire trip in both directions is along the north coastal shore of Guadalcanal with the ocean on the right or left depending upon the direction of the traveler.

The Sea

The atoll is beautiful place, but Sikaiana would not do for a Hollywood movie set. There is a harsh difference between the reality of this atoll and Hollywood's image of an island paradise. Sikaiana has the beauty of a lovely location but it is a place where people struggle for their livelihood. The seashore is not a giant couch for lounging and sunbathing, but a workshop for scaling fish, washing cookware, and beaching canoes. The idea of a tourist lying along the seashore makes about as much sense as sunbathing along the concrete ramps of a super-highway.

The atoll gave me a feeling of fragile safety within an enveloping expanse of sea and sky. The sun is warm, breezes are refreshing, the water along the shore of the islets is often calm, and the far horizon is unobstructed. It is an immense world of sand, sea and sky in shades of yellow, green, and blue. There is not so much a sense of exotic charm and calm, as one sees in advertisements and films, but a feeling that nature's forces are immense in both threatening and protecting life. It is a kind of beauty which is breathtaking, but I would not describe it as relaxing.

The lagoon is a blend of blues and green. The water changes shades of these colors from almost clear to almost black as its depth changes. In places where the bottom can be seen from the surface, the water is a very light green. The deeper the water gets, the darker are its blues and greens. The deep areas of the lagoon, like the ocean outside the reef, is a very dark blue, almost black. Facing across the lagoon, one sees concentric layers of colors: first the narrow brown line of reef which encloses the lagoon; then, a sliver of white foam from waves breaking along the reef's edge; next, the blue ocean; then, another thin, sharp line at the horizon; and finally the pale sky and

clouds.

As the tide changes, so does the appearance of the lagoon. At times when the tide is high, almost all the coral rock along the inside of the reef is covered by water, as is the entire platform of the reef. At such times, the lagoon and reef seem to be clean and none of the rough edges of coral showing above the water. At low tide, by contrast, the inside fringe of the reef is cluttered with brown, yellow and gray rocks that are much too disorderly for Hollywood or travel agents. At low tide, it is possible to walk along the entire circumference of the reef's platform from islet to islet and eventually to circumvent the entire atoll, although it would probably take the entire day to make the round trip.

Close to the shore of the islets, the water's bottom is sandy and shallow. Further towards the lagoon and reef there is the meandering trail of light blue water which canoes follow to weave their way out to the main passage, about 1/2 mile away. On the ocean side, waves break directly onto the reef; there are no coral outcroppings. On the lagoon side of the reef's platform, there is a border of shallow water several hundred yards wide. It is difficult to paddle a canoe through this inside fringe because coral rock grows everywhere. Moving further from the reef and closer to the lagoon, the water gets deeper and coral grows less frequently near the surface. The center of the lagoon is deep and its surface is choppy. The depth of the lagoon is marked by a change of water from a calm light blue to a dark choppy blue. It is sometimes hard to steer a canoe in this deeper water, especially when there is a wind. If the canoe travels into the lagoon's waves, water will splash over the sides, and it may swamp. But along the borders between the edge of the deep lagoon and where the water gets shallower as it approaches the reef, there is an avenue of chartreuse water which is deep enough so that the canoe won't run aground, but calm enough to make steering it manageable.

I always felt small when I was fishing in the lagoon or along the reef. There are expanses of green and blue encircled by the brown reef. The atoll is several miles across and the islets become small as one moves further into the lagoon. But the sky and ocean beyond remain immense and enveloping. Above, a lower softer level of clouds travels slowly across the sky. They move below a higher level of immobile clouds. Everything seems to be circles of change and permanence, fragility and stability.

Inside the reef, the bottom varies. In some places it is fields of smooth, comfortable sand. In other places it is a mush of grayish matter, smashed coral, sand, and rocks, reminding me of the brackish barnacled feeling of looking at the bottom of a boat. The fish are much more colorful than the coral. Their English names describe their variegated forms: clown fish, parrot fish, angel fish, zebra fish, and scorpion fish.

A person is exposed while out on the reef. There is no shade from the sun, nor, once a little distance from the islets, protection from the wind. It can get very hot or very cold, and sometimes the changes are fast. I always got sunburned on the first day I went out to the reef after an absence from Sikaiana. Once after returning from a two month stay in Honiara, I foolishly thought the faded tan on my arms would protect me from the sun and did not wear a long sleeved shirt. Several days later my biceps were

peeling and oozing puss. That one day's exposure to the sun had burnt more than hot metal. Even the Sikaiana get sunburned when they go out on the reef after a time away from it.

It also can get very cold on the reef. Some of the most uncomfortable times of my life, much more uncomfortable than any snowstorm, were spent shivering on Sikaiana's reef. If cloudy, the water is chilly and, without the sun's warmth, a person's body starts to shake with chills. In the evenings, it gets cold as the sun sets or a cloud near the horizon blocks what little warmth it could provide at this time of day. If it rains, the rain water feels colder than the ocean water and it is possible to warm up by diving under water. But this solution is only temporary. Soon the chills start, and so long as a person stays in the rain and water, they don't stop. Worse, there are several months in the year when there are strong winds. If the wind is from the east, it is blocked by the island when one is in the water close to Hale. But a little way out into the lagoon, the wind can be felt. When there is both wind and rain, it gets very uncomfortable, not only for me but also for the Sikaiana. Many Sikaiana are reluctant to go to the sea when it is rainy, cloudy, or in the evening when the sun is setting.

Although it gets chilly, even cold, the late afternoon was my favorite time of day to go fishing. Out in the lagoon at that time of day, there is a soft beauty. In one direction the sun is lowering behind Muli Akau, the islets at the Western end of the lagoon. In the other direction, Hale looks beautiful in the low, gentle light. At midday, the sun gives off a sharp kind of light that is both hazy and harsh. But in the evening it comes across the lagoon from an angle, reflecting under the coconut palms. The greens of the trees are deeper and softer, almost silver, and the land's browns and yellows glow.

The Bush

Hale, by far the largest of the four islets, has about 562 acres of land; of this about 124 is swamp. The ocean is never forgotten. The surf is heard almost everywhere. Along the shore of the lagoon, the sounds of breaking waves come from the opposite direction than the ocean. This is because the reef is closer to the ocean on the other, eastern, side of the islet than on the lagoon side.

There is a wide path that went from the houses directly behind mine, past the former sites of Sikaiana's main ritual house and ceremonial ground and into the interior. The interior is thickly covered with trees and vegetation. In Pijin, the Sikaiana refer to the interior as the "bush." The path is well-marked with a well-worn center of smooth dirt and a border of grass along its sides. Coconut trees are everywhere. Some tall ones slant across the path (in 1987 some had fallen from the recent cyclone). Near the path are newly planted trees which are shorter and straighter, but without any nuts.

After following the path for about a minute or two, there is an incline to a raised area, and the path looks down on taro swamps. The path is still wide and clearly marked, with coconut trees along both sides. Below the path on both sides, there are taro gardens which run in long rectangular lines away from the path. Taro stalks are

planted in neat rows following the sometimes bending sweep of the gardens. In different gardens, the taro can be at different stages of growth. Some are fully grown plants, with long, green, lush, triangular leaves several feet in length. In other gardens, little green sprouts of recently planted taro stand naked above the mud and the dried leaves used for mulch. There are muddy ditches along each side of these gardens where women stand as they tend the taro.

Looking beyond the gardens, cleared orderliness gives way to the forest. There are more coconut trees and other, larger, fuller trees. Large trees include the *ihi*, which bears a nut like a chestnut, and the *natu*, which bears a soft fruit something like a cross between a pear and a mango. Tall pandanus trees have long sharp leaves.

Continuing towards the eastern shore of Hale, which I always thought of the "back" because it is the opposite side from the inhabited main path of houses, the path drops down again to level off with the surrounding land. The Sikaiana also refer to this side of the island as *Tua*, or "back". After passing a few more taro plots, the path reaches a neatly planted grove with straight lines of coconut trees. This grove was planted about 20 years ago by an ambitious man hoping to earn money from copra. As the path approaches the shore on the east side of Hale, it becomes cluttered with chunks of coral and large ferns. The open expanse of the taro gardens is replaced by the cloister of high trees and coconut groves. There are several fences with pigs inside. Giant clam shells are used as water troughs for pigs.

The path intersects with another that follows the back eastern shore of the islet. Occasionally, there are breaks in the brush along this path, providing glimpses of the reef. These breaks in the bushes are littered with large mounds of coconut husks, left by people making copra or feeding their pigs. On the back shore, there are about 200 yards of rocky shallow water to the fringe of the reef, and then, quite abruptly, the Pacific Ocean.

On the lagoon side, I felt that I was facing an expanse of sea and sky. But the back shore gives a different impression, one of confinement in which the universe seems to be pressing down. As much as I found the lagoon side to have a comforting beauty, I never much cared for the view from the back. The feeling of confinement comes from being so close to the reef with its breaking waves and then, suddenly, the open ocean. On the back, the horizon seems very low, the sky bearing down on the strips of ocean and rocky reef. On the lagoon side, the horizon is very high up in the sky because the expanses of the lagoon, reef and three islets separate the earth from the sky. There is a sense of isolation but without fear or loneliness. Indeed, the lagoon side gave me the impression of a large, protected bubble of life. In contrast, my feeling about the back shore was confinement and limitation.

I was often startled if I encountered someone walking along the paths in the bush. The primal vegetation was broken by the appearance of a human being who would usually stop, giggle, and ask me where I was going. The Sikaiana probably had a very different feeling about the interior of the islet. Although they seemed to find something frightening in deserted areas, especially at night when some people still fear

encountering spirits, they knew the interior much better than I. They knew where the paths led, the names of various territories and locations along the way, and who had the land rights to use them. To me the interior never became familiar. Their feelings about the lagoon side and the back side of the atoll were probably similar to mine, although for different reasons. The lagoon side is where everyone lives and where there is easy access to the rest of the atoll through the lagoon. The other side is simply a place to temporarily perform chores, feed pigs, and look for coconuts.

Places and History

Along the entire reef, different areas are named, often after spirits, *tupua*, who were believed to have inhabited that location. On shore, all land is divided into territories or estates with boundaries and names. Some locations ashore are also associated with *tupua*. During my stays a few people seemed to believe that there were *tupua* in certain locations, most seemed more indifferent, perhaps they once existed but were no longer there, or never had been.

Along the reef, all I ever saw was a jumble of coral and rocks. I was only vaguely aware of my relative location in terms of Hale and Muli Akau. But the Sikaiana can name each place along the reef and they remember the location of specific coral formations within these areas. Once I returned ashore without a knife I had dropped along the reef. A man, who had seen where I had been fishing, told my location to a boy. The boy went back to area and recovered the knife within a couple minutes. I knew my general location, but I never would have found where I was standing or the knife within the acres of jumbled coral formations. Another time, when I set up a fishing net alone, I swam a little distance away from it. When I swam back to where I thought I had set the net, I could not find it. It took me about 20 minutes of rambling around to find it again. All the time I hoped no one would happen to come by in a canoe and learn of my embarrassing predicament.

The Sikaiana recognize locations along the reef in the same way we know street corners and signposts in a neighborhood where we have lived all our lives. Some of these locations also mark legendary events in Sikaiana's history.

The Hetuna

Along the reef just south of TeHaolei, there are a group of large stones that are scattered about in different directions. These stones are larger than a man, and blockish in shape. According to the Sikaiana, these stones are the remains of the Hetuna, former inhabitants of the atoll who were conquered and vanquished by the ancestors of the present-day inhabitants. The blockish shape of these coral rocks, and the random direction in which they are scattered, did remind me of wooden block men who have fallen over.

By legend, the founder hero of Sikaiana is Tehui Atahu, who left his homeland,

Luahatu, in search of new lands. He was accompanied by his brother and, in some versions of the legend, his son(s). As he traveled, he picked up different crew members from other islands, including Santa Cruz, Takuu and Luaniua. Upon his first arrival at Sikaiana, the land was still submerged, although visible below the water. After sending one of his crew members to make a claim by marking the land with a long pole or spear, Tehui Atahu traveled about 400 kilometers to the northwest, to Luaniua, the largest village on Ontong Java. There he befriended a Luaniua leader, Tehui Luaniua. Together, they returned to Sikaiana and found that the land had emerged above sea level and was occupied by another race, the Hetuna.

Tehui Atahu set about to deceive the Hetuna and acquire Sikaiana. He convinced the Hetuna of his prior claim to the land by secretly building a wall across the interior and then placing moss along the wall to make it look old (the remains of a ruined wall are still visible). Secretly plotting to kill them, he convinced the Hetuna to help him build a house to be used in ritual ceremonies. While the Hetuna were all on top of the house tying down its roofing, Tehui Atahu ordered his followers to kill them. Some Hetuna managed to escape the initial slaughter and ran along the reef. The coral blocks lying along the shore near TeHaolei are the remains of these few Hetuna who were slain as they were trying to flee.

Tehui Atahu promised that he would reward the crew member who slew the most Hetuna with the chieftomship. When his brother won the contest, Tehui Atahu killed him and established himself as chief of Sikaiana. After a falling out with Tehui Luaniua (in some versions of the legend, after the latter's adultery with the wife of Tehui Atahu), the former friends had a tug of war contest to determine who should rule Sikaiana. In most versions of the legend, the contest resulted in a draw, and it was decided to divide the main islet, Hale, between the two men. Tehui Atahu took control over about 2/3 of Hale and Tehui Luaniua took the rest. The chieftomship alternated between the patrilineal descendants of these two men.

Some of the people who joined Tehui Atahu during his travels established ritual houses and became the original founders of different "tribes" or clans. After dying, Tehui Atahu, Tehui Luaniua and other founders became some of the gods whose names were invoked in the ceremonies in Hale Aitu, the central ritual house, where wooden statues of them were placed.

Some Sikaiana people claim that Tehui Atahu came from Atafu Island in the Tokelau Islands. Other Sikaiana claim that he came from an island with that same name in the Tongan group. Either origin is a possibility; neither is certain. Most elder people consistently claim that his origin is unknown, and my hunch is that an uncertain origin is part of the legend. The title Tehui is used to refer to several of Sikaiana's founder heroes, including Tehui Atahu, Tehui Luaniua, and Tehui Takuu. In the Sikaiana language, *hui* is the word for a 'cluster of coconuts' (te is the definite article, 'the'). I was told that the title Tehui refers to the fact that these founder heroes represented a leader and his followers, which is metaphorically similar to a cluster of coconuts. It is not possible to determine how long ago Tehui Atahu lived. In the speculative genealogies offered by some people, Tehui Atahu lived between 17 to 23 generations ago.

Most people agree that genealogies are unreliable before the "Tona" invasion and slaughter which occurred about 12 generations ago.

TePalena

About a mile away from Hale on the north side of the reef is a very shallow area of water named TePalena. At low tide, a long low coral platform stands above the water. The Sikaiana like to go fishing with a net in this area. There are long stretches of shallow water with a sandy bottom which makes it easier to encircle fish and chase them into a net. According to Sikaiana legend, TePalena is the remains of an islet where about 12 generations ago a band of marauders from "Tona" stayed. The word Tona is cognate with the name, Tonga, and the Sikaiana associate these invaders with that island. But *tona* is a common Polynesian word for a direction, often "south" or "leeward" and may refer to peoples from lands in that direction that are closer to Sikaiana than Tonga.

Exhausted from their long overseas voyages, these men from Tona prevailed upon Sikaiana hospitality and resided on TePalena until they recovered their strength. Their leader, a man named Vaeoma, feigned friendship with the Sikaiana, but was merely waiting until his men had recovered their strength from their long voyage. He planned to kill Sikaiana's inhabitants. Leitaka, a Sikaiana leader who had an affair with Vaeoma's wife, learned about this plot and every night secretly swam to TePalena, where the marauders were sleeping, and slew a few of them. After a while, Vaeoma noticed that his forces were being depleted and decided to attack. In the ensuing struggle he was matched against Leitaka and eventually killed him. Afterwards Vaeoma and his men proceeded to slay almost all of Sikaiana's men. Most Sikaiana agree that genealogies before this time are imprecise because all the mature men who knew them were slain by Vaeoma and his followers.

Vaeoma and his men voyaged on to Taumako, another Polynesian speaking island about 400 kilometers to the southeast. There, the men of Tona were all slain after a Sikaiana hostage warned the Taumakans of Vaeoma's treachery on Sikaiana.

Traditions associated with the Tona invasion suggest that Sikaiana had contacts across long distances of ocean with other Polynesian peoples. The travels of two men of this period, Semalu and Kaetekita, are recounted in a traditional song genre, *tuuho*. The Resident Commissioner of the Solomon Islands at the turn of the century, Charles Woodford (1906:167) collected a story that Kaetekita had journeyed to Malaita, Isabel, Taumako, Tikopia, and various other islands in the area. Even by the time that Woodford collected the legend, at the beginning of this century, some Sikaiana people had traveled widely with European traders, and these place names may have been incorporated into this legend as a result of their travels.

Muli Akau

The three islets at the western end of the atoll are known collectively as Muli Akau. The Sikaiana are reluctant to discuss the continued existence of pre-Christian spirits, but some of them still refer to a spirit named Kaealiki who is reported to have inhabited an area near the middle islet, Matuiloto. The Sikaiana also say that the Sakamani, a small people, something like leprechauns, inhabit the islets of Muli Akau. Although these little people are never seen, the Sikaiana claim that on some mornings the Sakamani leave their small footprints in the sand. In former times, these islets also seem to have had a special ceremonial connotation. When men and women divided into separate groups to compose songs, one sex would go to Muli Akau to compose their songs in secret away from the opposite sex. By secretly composed their songs, critical of the opposite sex, they could return to Hale and surprise the opposite sex with their songs.

The Sikaiana like to go to these islets for fishing because the areas closer to Hale have been over-fished. A Sikaiana man once told me he liked going to these islets because they are "clean and fresh." The beaches are clear and free of the rubbish found on the beaches of Hale, where daily use shows. During the vacations of Sikaiana's primary school, parents like to go there with their families and stay for a few days so they can get away from the hustle and bustle of the main islet. Even on an isolated atoll, people need to get away from it all.

Vaka Vusu, a descent line claiming Tehui Atahu as its ancestor, used to bury their dead in the ocean beyond Matuiloto. Today, there is a well-kept cemetery on Hale where everyone is buried in the Christian fashion. But in the past, the Sikaiana had several ways of disposing of their dead. A few people were buried on land. Others were set adrift in canoes. And others were buried in the deep waters beyond the reef. One woman of the Vaka Vusu clan, Peia, was still alive when she was sent to the bottom of the sea just beyond Matuiloto.

I heard the story of Peia from Fane, a woman in her eighties, who knew Peia. Peia lived in the early 1900s before the arrival of the Christian mission, while Fane was a young woman. Fane had matured before the arrival of missionaries. Although a Christian at the time I knew her, Fane also held that many traditional beliefs were true.

Fane says that the trouble started when Peia's husband reported that one of Peia's relatives, Tomaniva, was having affairs with the wives of certain men. The cuckolded husbands began keeping a sharper eye on their wives and Tomaniva could no longer arrange his secret trysts. Tomaniva eventually died, but his anger at Peia's husband remained with him after death. The Sikaiana used to believe that after dying some men lived on as spirits. Tomaniva became a spirit or *aitu mate*. To avenge himself on Peia's husband, Tomaniva's spirit made Peia sick.

One night Peia lay near death. Indeed, everyone thought she had died. But on the following morning, Peia recovered and recounted the following experience which she had that night with the spirit of Tomaniva.

Peia told people that as she lay near death the night before, the spirit of

Tomaniva took her inner spirit from out of her body. He led her spirit away from the house where her body continued to lie near death. They followed the main path into the bush, past the ritual houses and taro gardens to the back of the islet, and then to the beach there. At the shore, Tomaniva used his spiritual powers to turn a coconut husk into a boat and they drifted out to the reef. At the reef they waded into the water to the point where the waves break and then Tomaniva told Peia to grab hold of his belt. He dove down with Peia holding on behind. He dove deep beneath the surface, and eventually they reached the Hitiana, a place inhabited by spirits. There Tomaniva told Peia to sit by an old woman whom Peia recognized, although this woman had died many years before. After waiting for a while, Tomaniva returned, led Peia back ashore, and left her.

Although ashore on the far side of Hale, Peia felt lost. Unsure of where to go, she saw an old man who also, like the woman in the Hitiana, had died many years before. Peia asked him where to find the path to the main part of the village. The old man lifted his hand and pointed. A path suddenly opened out and became clear through the brush. Peia followed the path back to the lagoon side of the islet where her spirit re-entered her body.

The next morning, Peia awoke and recounted her experiences of the previous night to those present. Eventually, Peia recovered her physical health. But she began to go insane. Tomaniva had driven her crazy when he took her on the trip to the Hitiana.

Peia started taking on lovers. Before the conversion to Christianity, many people had secret love affairs. But Peia flaunted Sikaiana custom by being completely indiscriminate and public, taking lovers at any time of day and night. Fane said that Sikaiana's men found Peia to be very attractive; she had a light complexion which the Sikaiana admire.

Eventually her husband left her. She began to steal things. She even stole the burial shrouds from a deceased person. She got into fights. Once, she lit a stalk of coconut leaf and began burning a crippled woman who could not walk. Peia also behaved in a peculiar fashion, sometimes walking along banging her fist against her elbow, making strange sounds. Unlike, the Sikaiana who paddle in canoes or walk along the reef's platform at low tide, she waded in the water from islet to islet. Some say she had acquired magical powers that allowed her to travel very fast between the islets.

A bachelor foolishly decided that he wanted to live with her. He was discouraged by both Peia's and his own relatives. After all, who would ever want to marry anyone so crazy? But the man was determined.

One night Fane was sitting with some relatives near the house where Peia and her husband were staying. They noticed that Peia was cooking and assumed that it was something she had stolen. One of the men went to peek into Peia's house to see what it was, and as he approached he saw blood oozing out of the house's entrance. Inside, Peia, completely crazy, was cutting up her husband and preparing to cook him.

Peia's brother, TePeau, decided that she had finally gone too far: she would have to share the fate of her dead husband. The husband's relatives objected, telling Tepeau that the husband knew she was crazy and never should have married her in the first place. But TePeau, although grieving, was insistent. Peia had to die. Peia was taken across the lagoon to Matuiloto where she was wrapped in cloth. Fane said that the cloth was wrapped so tightly that Peia's face flushed. Peia said nothing to those wrapping her except, "it is very tight."

Peia was then taken by canoe to the place in the ocean that her descent line used for burying people. On her way she spoke her last words, asking for her only child, a daughter. But upset by the gruesome turn of events, the daughter and many other family members had stayed away. Peia was lowered into the surface of the ocean so that the cloth would become heavy as it absorbed the water. When the cloth was heavy with water, those holding on to her told her to hold her breath and then released her to drown in the ocean's depths.

TAHA

Taha is the roughest part of the Sikaiana reef. Everywhere else, the reef is always some distance from the islets, providing protection from the ocean. But here the reef turns at a very sharp angle and actually meets with the northeast corner of Hale. In one direction, there is the sandy stretch of beach following the back of the islet. In the other direction one can see the reef separating away from the islet as the shore leads to the front where the village is located. In the distance, beyond the stretch of the reef's northern side, the hazy islets of TeHaolei and Matuiloto can be seen.

The waves are higher at Taha than anywhere else; they break only a short distance from the islet's shore. At the sharp corner made from the meeting of both islet and reef, the waves come from two sides. There is a mound of rock, coral gravel and drift wood that has been built up by the pounding of the seas. There is a strong wind which, like so many other aspects of the atoll's beauty, makes me feel vulnerable. A short distance in either direction, the wind dies down. In 1986, this area of the atoll was hit hardest by the cyclone. Even after a year, the shore was cluttered with shattered coconut trees.

Taha is the place where in late August 1942, three American navy pilots, shot down during combat with the Japanese, came ashore in their lifeboat.

When I first met the Sikaiana, they often referred to other Americans whom they had met previously. Older people remembered Americans who were stationed in the Solomon Islands during World War II. Some had met Americans on Guadalcanal at the main base during the Battle of Guadalcanal, Henderson airbase (which is still the nation's main airport). Americans also visited the atoll during the war. The Sikaiana remember several ships which spent a day there. American fliers in seaplanes landed in the lagoon during patrols.

One incident is commemorated in a series of songs still performed by older

women who learned the songs in their youth. The Sikaiana told me that one night three Navy fighters had to ditch their plane. In the early morning, they drifted ashore in their life boat. One of the fliers had broken his leg and was left at the seashore with the lifeboat. The other two went ahead to find help. Some Sikaiana young men who had attended missionary schools spoke enough English to be able to communicate with the fliers and went to retrieve their injured comrade.

These fliers stayed on Sikaiana for a few days until, after shooting a flare, they were spotted by a seaplane and taken from Sikaiana. The Sikaiana remember these fliers vividly: "Bini," the captain, "Polo" and "Kalati" were the crew. Polo couldn't walk because of his broken leg. According to the songs, the young women were greatly enamored with the beauty of the fliers and felt sorrow at their departure. As I shall explain in a later chapter, these songs were composed by the young women, not to praise the Americans, but to tease the Sikaiana young men.

During my stay in 1980-1983, the Sikaiana often speculated about the fate of these three fliers, assuming that perhaps they had all died in the war. I was somewhat doubtful about many of the details of the Sikaiana story, and although I thought I would try to find these fliers when I returned to the United States, I was skeptical about whether it would be possible.

In 1985, I wrote the U.S. Navy Department to find out if they had any records of this event. With the help of the Navy's extensive archive service, and the records that were kept during the war, I found that three fliers, Paul Knight (Polo), Harold Bingaman (Bini) and Calvin Crouch (Kalati) from the aircraft carrier *Enterprise* were downed near Sikaiana and picked up from there several days later. About six months later, again with the help of the Navy Department, I was talking with Paul Knight in his house just outside of Bethesda, Maryland, listening to his very vivid memories of those three days.

And as a postscript, I should add that in the early 1990s, I was teaching at Millersville University and showed a slide of Paul Knight. A woman in the back announced in amazement that it was her grandfather. Unbeknown to me, I had Paul Knight's granddaughter in my class.

¹ Robert and Priscilla told me that by 2018, all canoes were manufactured from fiberglass and brought to Sikaiana. The *manau* was no longer made on Sikaiana.