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### Preface, in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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# Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

William W. Donner



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## New Introduction 2020

This ethnography is based upon living as an anthropologist among the Sikaiana people of the Solomon Islands. I lived there for a total of about 3 ½ years between 1980 and 1993. Most of the material in this ethnography was written between 1988 and 1994 and was intended to be published.

Readers should be aware that life is very different for the Sikaiana people today in 2020 in some significant ways. There have been many changes in Sikaiana life over the past 30 years. Readers should also be aware that this book is not typical of contemporary ethnographic writing and anthropology. I have added a short description of some of the changes since the 1980s in a short section at the end of this introduction.

This book is about my understanding of the Sikaiana people from 1980-1993, not about their lives today. I have left most of the book in the “ethnographic present,” that is I use the present tense to describe general cultural patterns that took place in the 1980s. An earlier generation of anthropologists developed this technique in writing ethnographies. The work of anthropologists is to document human diversity. The experiences of a group of people at any point in time reflect some of the diversity of human experience and should be recognized for having its own significance. The past, as some say, is a foreign country. This technique is justly criticized for masking the temporality and dynamics of human life. My use of the present tense is even more problematic because these chapters are really grounded in the past: it is not fully accurate in depicting present-day Sikaiana life in 2020. I wrote most of this about 5-10 years after living on Sikaiana, when their life was very much in **my** present. I find that in all my writing, including in ethnographic writing about regional cultures in Pennsylvania, it is challenging to decide what tense to use. In the case of this book, I simply do not want to try to develop the words to describe something in a more remote past in the 1980s when I was living among the Sikaiana, from the perspective of a slightly more recent past in the early 1990s when I was writing this book. Beware of my ethnographic present. One of the biggest changes is the loss of the Sikaiana language as the main medium for everyday speech. I am told it simply is not used very much at all. This is probably the most dramatic change, but there are other changes as well. Occasionally, I add brief comments in red-type to bring readers up to date and historically contextualize the contents of these chapters. Most of these comments about the present are based upon conversations with Robert Sisilo and Priscilla Taulupo who lived in New York from 2017-19, while Robert was posted as the Solomon Islands ambassador to the United Nations.

Although I write about Sikaiana life in the ethnographic present, I write about my own experiences among the Sikaiana people using the past tense. Partly this is an artefact of the way this book was written. I was writing shortly after I left Sikaiana, looking back on myself and trying to explain specific events that shaped my understandings of them. This is somewhat misleading, but does reflect the fact that as I got to know them, I was changing much faster than they were, both in my understandings of them also in terms of the person who I am today. Their culture was something relatively stable that I was trying to understand.

Readers should also be aware that although most of this material has been published in various scholarly journals, it was never published as a book because no one wanted to publish it. To be a little fairer to the monograph and myself, no publisher that I considered worthy of publishing it, wanted it. I tried about 7 or 8 publishers, including a couple trade publishers and some of the better-known academic publishers. Three times it got beyond the series editors, who are rarely professional anthropologists, and sent to an outside reviewer, who were professional anthropologists. The reviewers were somewhat positive, but were not certain that the book would sell well or fit into the publishers' series. I wrote the book for a general audience including intelligent, interested lay people, college students and some professional colleagues. It was meant also to be something of a discourse on the nature of fieldwork. At the time I was writing, there was a strong post-modern movement that emphasized the subjectivity and contexts of ethnographic descriptions, calling into question any understanding of another culture. I wanted to describe my subjectivity as a vehicle to understandings that I believed had some empirical validity: my understandings were somehow intersubjective enough so that there was a common ground between me and the Sikaiana people that could also be shared with the readers of this book. I tried to explain how I came to these understandings and also show how they increased over time. The idea was that the movement of increased understanding in the book reflected my own increased understanding of the Sikaiana life. Alas, publishers and the reviewers did not seem very impressed. In 1995, I was tired of trying to find a worthy publisher and I was reluctant to lose the copyright to a second/third-tier publisher, my first child was born, and my research interests were shifting to regional ethnography in the United States. I stopped working on the book and it sat on my computer. Even by 1995, I saw some possibilities on the digital world and I wanted to keep the copyright to develop the book as I saw fit. In 2012, I took a sabbatical to resurrect this material as part of a website about Sikaiana.

This ethnography is a complement to other materials that are located on a website ([www.sikaianaarchives.com](http://www.sikaianaarchives.com) and also being added to this website). I think a website with pictures, songs, and other media is much closer to the actual experience of living with another culture than a book which is really one dimensional in its linear organization. Nevertheless, anthropologists still seem to be mainly interested in published written accounts, although media now offer an incredible range of expressive opportunities. Partly this is a result of the expectations of academic life. Back to this book.

The theoretical and comparative references in this book are also dated. Indeed, my approach to examine Sikaiana life in terms of some classical theories of modernization and differentiation was considered passé even in 1995. Nonetheless, I still think it is a useful perspective. Readers should know that there are many professional anthropologists who, if they ever took the time to read the book, would be unimpressed. They would find the theoretical sections dated, and they would not be interested in the descriptive sections. In short, readers should not take this as an exemplar of contemporary anthropology, although in my view that is not necessarily a bad thing. I am not impressed by many of the contemporary trends in anthropology.

I have done very little editing of the early 1990s version in presenting this version. I have updated a few of the literary or theoretical references. Like the Sikaiana people, the rest of the world has changed in the last 40 years and so has the academic discipline of anthropology. Anthropologists are much less likely to find an isolated community (although Sikaiana was far from isolated in 1980) and if they did are likely to have different interests. Much of contemporary anthropology is focused on issues of power and the various expressions of power in affecting marginal groups including those shaped by gender, social class, race, neo-colonialism, and race. These are important concerns, but generally they were not mine when I was living on Sikaiana and a little later when I wrote this book.

Readers should be aware that recent fashion in anthropology has also criticized this kind of ethnography for being implicitly racist, patriarchal, heteronormative, and embedded in an exploitative neo-liberal tradition. Perhaps this is all true. I am a white, heterosexual, male with a middle class, professional background, pushing 70 years old. Perhaps this has completely compromised all my thinking and writing. Readers can decide.

Despite all these shortcomings, when I re-read the book in 2012, I still liked it, and I admit that I still like it in 2020. I think this book and the accompanying material in the website offers an example of the expression of human diversity. Perhaps someone else will find something useful in it. Perhaps some Sikaiana people will appreciate it as a source for understanding their cultural heritage. I think it worthwhile to learn about other cultures, I think I have something worthwhile to write, and I think that knowledge should be shared. I certainly learned a lot from the Sikaiana people and I want to share that with other people.

In 2012, I changed the title. The original title was *Polynesian Voyagers in the 20th Century* and was meant to be vaguely reminiscent of Bronislaw Malinowski's famous book, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. I saw Sikaiana's ancestors as voyagers across large expanses of ocean, and saw the present-day people as voyaging into a contemporary, complex, global culture. The new title reflects my continuing experience that as they voyaged through many changes there was a deep intimacy and closeness in Sikaiana life. That is still my main conclusion about my experiences with them in 2020. It was reinforced when I met Robert and Priscilla in New York in 2017 and we started talking about the Sikaiana individuals who we knew while I lived there (and their children and grandchildren).

I have changed some names and deleted a couple sections to preserve confidentiality. I did not include extended sections of the Sikaiana vernacular; instead I mostly include the English translations.

Robert Sisilo and Priscilla Taulupo read an earlier version in about 1991. I am grateful for their comments; they are not responsible for any inaccuracies or deficiencies. As stated above, I also had the fortune to meet with them in 2017-19, while Robert was posted as the Solomon Islands representative to the United Nations in New

York. My comments about changes in Sikaiana life since 1980-93 are largely based on discussions with them.

I have occasional comments about changes in Sikaiana life since the 1980s are marked in red.

The following is a short summary of the changes.

This website is based on research of about 40 months of ethnographic research and living among the Sikaiana people between 1980 and 1993. The information here is dated and should not be seen as representing Sikaiana life at present (2020). At this point, this website should be viewed as a heritage site rather than a description of contemporary Sikaiana life, although Sikaiana people still follow some of the practices described here. There have been many changes in Sikaiana life since my stays. I have been told that one of the most notable changes is the loss of the Sikaiana language in everyday conversations, even in the conversations of older, fluent speakers. Another change from my time is the use of social media, notably Facebook, by people who are Sikaiana or, as the result of intermarriage with other ethnic groups in the Solomon Islands, people descended from Sikaiana ancestors, many of whom still have close ties to the culture and island. Much of the social media is concerned with postings about family events and some postings about political issues in the Solomon Islands that impact the Sikaiana people.

For cool examples of contemporary use of social media, see the songs posted on YouTube by 94islandBoy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bJhTE-sLk8>

Between 2017-2019, Robert Sisilo was posted by the Solomon Islands as their country's representative to the United Nations in New York City. He was accompanied by his wife, Priscilla Taulupo and some of his relatives. Robert was the first Sikaiana person I met in 1980 while he was studying in Fiji, where I stopped on my first trip to the Solomon Islands, and I have known him over the years. I knew Priscilla from my stays on Sikaiana, 1980-1983. Robert and Priscilla told me about the many changes that have taken place among the Sikaiana people. Below I include some the changes that they described to me in conversations and in a taped interview conducted in September 2019. Both were clear that they could not speak with much specificity about life on the island Sikaiana itself since they have not spent extended time there recently. But they are both very deeply involved with the Sikaiana community. They are not responsible for any misunderstandings on my part.

Readers are reminded that my view of the Sikaiana community includes the people on the island, and people who have emigrated to other parts of the Solomon Islands including the US and Australia. The majority of emigrants live in and around Honiara, the capital of the Solomon Islands. It is interesting to me that at least some of these

emigrants still refer to Sikaiana island as “home” and their postings on social media show a continuing loyalty to the welfare of the people, both on the island and elsewhere. As during my stays from 1980 to 1993, there is a concentration of Sikaiana people at Tenaru about ten miles outside of Honiara, where there is a settlement, a cultural village established for tourists, and the site of an annual Sikaiana festival, Tuata.

Probably the biggest change concerns language use. The Sikaiana language is not being used very much by anyone, including the older people who as younger people spoke it during my stays in the 1980s. Robert thinks the changes in language loss may have come about in the 1990s. He said that grandparents speak Pijin because they want to communicate with their grandchildren who do not understand the language. Robert and Priscilla said sometimes younger people will make fun of people using the language. There were two young adults at various times in his house in New York and neither used the Sikaiana language, although my impression was that they could understand some of the common phrases. Robert and Priscilla said most conversations among Sikaiana people are in Pijin. Robert and Priscilla think that when their generation dies (they are in their sixties), the language will be lost. Robert said that he had visited Luaniua, which has close historical and cultural ties with Sikaiana, and the people there, unlike on Sikaiana, still spoke Luaniua. Robert and Priscilla were born in the 1950s and think that theirs will be the last generation to use the Sikaiana language. During my stays with them between 2017-19, they spoke to each other in three languages: English, Pijin and Sikaiana. Our discussions were mostly in English; their fluency in English far superior to mine in Sikaiana.

I have seen that many Sikaiana people use social media, especially Facebook, and most of the postings are in English, which is usually quite good. During my stays in the 1980s, few people used English and although several people could speak understandable English, it was not as correct as the postings I see on Facebook. During my stays, I considered only a very few to be fluent.

Some traditional work patterns and crafts are still practiced. People on Sikaiana still make coconut sap products including *kamaimai* (molasses), *tono* (round sweet), *mea ppili* (taffy-like candy). Taro (*haahaa*, *kapulaka*) and banana (*huti*) are still grown on Sikaiana. People still keep pigs and chickens. Most forms of fishing including diving (*sepu*) and trolling (*hakattaki*) are still practiced. Women still collect shellfish, although Priscilla said there is a different technique that has become popular in which the shell fish are found in sand rather than on the reef. She described this form of shell collecting as “*sii(r)aku*” and contrasted it with the collection of shellfish (*okoalli*) on the reef that I knew about from my stays. People still dry the shell fish and send them to relatives in Honiara. People still catch birds with a net (*seu manu*).

People still make leaf houses from local materials on Sikaiana. This requires weaving coconut mats (*tapakau*). (During my stays all houses inhabited by Sikaiana people in Honiara and Tenaru were made from manufactured materials, roofing iron, particle board walling and wood, and I assume that is still the case.) Other houses are made of manufactured materials.

Sikaiana houses are set further inland from the shore than in my time because of tide surges, presumably the result of global warming. (A tidal surge ran across Matuavi, one of the smaller of the four islets in the atoll.) Their description is that houses are set somewhat apart and inland with some flowered and gardened entry ways; unlike during my stays when most houses were on both sides of a path that flowed the shoreline and were built open to view to everyone walking along the main path. Physically it seems to me that Sikaiana houses have become more private.

On Sikaiana houses now have solar panels to provide a small amount of electricity.

Some women still weave pandanus sleeping mats (*vasa*), although most people sleep on manufactured mattresses (I estimate that about half the people slept on *vasa* during the 1980s). The loom (*mea hau*) is still displayed at the cultural village for tourists, and loom belts (*taakai*) are still made. (During my stays in the 1980s only a very few women wore the *taakai* when pregnant, traditionally it was worn during and after pregnancy. The only times anyone actually worked on a loom between 1980-83 was when I commissioned a loom as part of a museum collection.)

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Men no longer make the dugout canoe (*manau*). All canoes are fiberglass and imported. Dugout *manau* were the main form of transportation during my stays and most families had several. They were frequently being made in 1980s. In the 1980s, the

*manau* was a single hull canoe that had replaced the traditional outrigger canoe (*vaka hai ama*). During my stays, there were no *vaka hai ama* on Sikaiana, although I heard stories that one was constructed after my stay by older men out of a sense of tradition (the *vaka hai ama* could be used to catch flying fish which was seen as a delicacy).

During my stays, there was usually a ship once a month, although sometimes mechanical problems delayed the arrival of ship. At present, the schedule is more irregular, the ship arriving about once every three months, maybe less frequently.

Robert and Priscilla said that families are not as close as they used to be. Children are more independent from their parents and others than in past times. People are more geographically dispersed. A lot of children leave the island to go to school in Honiara. There are many more marriages with other ethnic groups (including both of their children). Fosterage, which was very common during my stays in the 1980s, is less common, although some still exists. They cared for their grandson while in New York. Robert thinks that a lot of children stay with their parents to continue their schooling.

They said that the regulations in interpersonal interactions, the “shame” (*napa*) between in-laws are not followed as strongly as when I was there in the 1980s. A few people keep these prohibitions but mostly they are not followed, especially by younger people. They don’t know about how frequently these traditional prohibitions are followed on Sikaiana, but in Honiara they think most younger people no longer follow some of the traditional regulations on cross-sex siblings (*kave*, usually extended to second cousins and sometimes further) which included not touching clothing or bedding which had been touched by a *kave*.

There are more divorces and more casual romances. There also is some relaxation in expectations around courtship. When I was there young men and women should not be seen together in public, either on Sikaiana or in Honiara and Tenaru. They did not know whether or not this is still the case on Sikaiana, but this custom is not followed among the migrant community in Honiara where couples are willing to be seen together. The guitar dances between young men and women that were popular during my stays and offered some sanctioned opportunity for contact between young men and women, seem to have been discontinued.

I have to note that during my stays, many people complained about the distancing of family relations, the weakening of fosterage, the loosening of restricted relations and the more open courtship patterns. The descriptions of Robert and Priscilla suggest that these relationships have loosened much further.

There are still a lot of land disputes as there were during my stays.

There are still marriage exchanges (*penupenu*). There is a lot more intermarriage with other ethnic groups and sometimes there is a *penupenu* as a part of these marriages.

They said that there is less frequent drinking of alcohol than during my stays. Coconut sap (*kaleve*) is no longer collected at the settlement at Tenaru, but some is still collected on Sikaiana. There is still some drinking. Some of the private stores on Sikaiana sell beer, especially for special occasions and holidays. There is drinking of some harder alcohol, which seems to be made by distilling. They used the word *lokol*, ('local?', meaning locally brewed?). Robert thinks that there are no longer the very large drinking groups, which often involved most of the island, and large groups of people at Tenaru. He said that the drinking groups in both locations are much smaller.

When I was on Sikaiana there were church services twice a day, and communion on Sundays. Weekday services were well attended, and almost the entire island's population came to Sunday services. There are still two services during weekdays on Sikaiana, but Robert and Priscilla were not sure about attendance. Robert and Priscilla said that at the church at the resettlement at Tenaru, there is very low attendance during weekdays with a large attendance on Sunday. They are not sure if this is also the case on Sikaiana. But they also told me that there were complaints on Sikaiana when the priest did not hold services on weekdays.

There is very widespread chewing of betelnut, both on Sikaiana and in Honiara, something that was rare during my stays. Betelnut is now grown on Sikaiana; it was not during my stays. People on Sikaiana keep honey bees, as a way to make money, again something that was not done during my stays.

There is no copra production on Sikaiana. Copra was an important source of income during my stays from 1980-83, but there was no production during my stay in 1987, following a major cyclone in 1986 that hit the island. Robert said the price of copra is so low that it is not viable to produce it. A beetle has ended copra production at the settlement at Tenaru, which never very large scale to my knowledge.

There is no longer a cooperative store on Sikaiana (apparently it was disbanded after the cyclone in 1986), but several people have established independent private stores. Robert and Priscilla said it is now possible to buy food on a regular basis, especially for people coming from Honiara for a visit. Someone could go to Sikaiana and pay for food. I never saw this happen on Sikaiana when I was there: food was embedded in family systems of generalized reciprocity. When I told him that I was surprised by this, Robert said, "it is becoming more commercialized."

During my stays, the local school on Sikaiana only went to Standard 6 (about 6<sup>th</sup> grade in an American school); the Sikaiana school now goes to Form 3 (about 9<sup>th</sup> grade).

There are some traditional practices that are still performed. Some people still give massages (*amosi*) for health and children of an expert I knew in the 1980s know how to set bones (*tootoo*). There are occasional song festivals (*puina*), usually associated with a special event. The most recent *puina* was performed to celebrate a Sikaiana person who was a priest.

During my stay in 1987, Sikaiana people in Honiara had formed a sports association (“Vania”) to support sports teams in Honiara sport leagues and other Sikaiana activities. Vania no longer exists but there are Sikaiana sports teams in Honiara’s sports leagues. These teams are named “Hale,” the Sikaiana term for ‘house’ that is also used to refer to the largest islet in the atoll where most people live.

A new ceremony, Tuata (‘stand beautiful’) was introduced in 2013. It is held annually at the resettlement in Tenaru and involves games, dances and other ceremonial events. Robert said it is a time to bring Sikaiana people together and is a popular event that brings in Sikaiana people from around the Solomon Islands. Also, there are events at a cultural village at Tenaru that are performed for tourists. These include traditional dances and other ceremonies, including demonstrations of the loom (*mea hau*).