



“Wasting time” the Veratan way

Conspicuous leisure and the value of waiting in Fiji

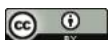
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This article explores time as a vehicle of values in Fiji through an analysis of abundant non-working time. The analysis centers on the Fijian chiefdom of Verata, where an appreciation of slowness, preparedness, relaxing, or even “time wasting” illustrates an alternative to abstract, labor-based valuation of time. The article employs a village-centric viewpoint from just outside Fiji’s main metropolitan area, in Naloto village with a dispersed citizenry comprising both salaried urbanites and resident villagers with no access to wage work. From their point of view, it is argued, time-wasting might not be as precious as a good job in town, but can be a bearer of value nonetheless.

Keywords: Fiji, time, value, leisure, Protestant Christianity

This article explores time as a vehicle of value for the people of Naloto village in the chiefdom of Verata in Fiji. The time under discussion here is the abstract, resource-like time used as a measure of labor and exemplified by the clock rather than the passage of historical time associated with change. The focus of the article is on a village just outside Fiji’s main metropolitan area, with limited access to the urban economy or wage work but with abundant time resources. One cannot exchange one’s time for money within the village, though one can leave the village in order to take up paid employment in Fiji’s urban centers or tourist resorts. Consequently, the village population of about three hundred people is constantly changing, the formerly urban employed retiring to the village, village residents moving out, and others wavering in-between.

For the sake of argument, this article accepts the claim that “time is money,” but in so doing also asks how else time can be valued. What else is time besides money? The political-economic tradition has shown us how thoroughly our understanding of time is embedded in the capitalist mode of production, but this standardized, disciplined “clock time” has effectively also spread far beyond the



contexts in which it originated. Kevin Birth (2012) argues that in using inherited objects like the clock to tell and standardize time, we are practically allowing the dead to think for us. Long before Birth, E. P. Thompson (1967) argued that the clock accompanies an ethos that directs our ability to value and appreciate time. Today that valuation of time reaches even communities and settings where time cannot be “money”: labor reserves, refugee camps, or other “surplus” populations caught in-between worlds who, though conscious of the value of labor, are often unable to realize it themselves. This article examines one such context to ask when, or how, it is possible to resist or challenge the valuation inherent in clock time.

Fiji was both colonized and Christianized in the late nineteenth century, and as early as 1908, Australian Methodist missionaries were reporting the death of “Old Fiji” and the birth of the new:

The shrill whistle—morning, noon and night—follows hard upon the heels of the discordant bell and summons the “labour” to the dirty, wheezing, groaning mill or to the warm, wet cane fields. The river is alive with fretful, panting steam launches, tugging and straining impatiently at sluggish, ungainly cane punts. Ever and anon screeching whistles or tooting horns or scrambling sirens hideously and braggartly declare that the New Fiji has been born. (Burton 1908: 262)

The full history of wage labor in Fiji is complicated, involving protectionist policies upheld with Indian migrant labor (e.g., Kaplan and Kelly 2001): the workforce summoned by the sugar mill whistle in the quote above actually refers to Indian indentured laborers rather than an indigenous labor force. For a long time, both the missionaries and the colonial administration acted to “protect” indigenous Fijians from the alienating market economy. This has shaped indigenous Fijian tradition, altered in contrast to European and Indian ways just as much as it has evolved from immemorial custom. The well-known and widely advertised concept of “Fiji time” attests to the continued significance of time in Fijian cultural politics.¹

Clock time arrived in Fiji even before indentured labor. Already in 1865, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (August 21) reported the newly established Council of Chiefs’ decision to impose an annual poll tax levied on all adult males, one pound of which could be substituted with ten days’ work, at eight hours per day. Later, during the colonial era, clock time was added to the official school curriculum: the Education Ordinance of 1916 introduced time, money, and linear measure together at Stage 4 Arithmetic; in 1929 “telling the time” and “mental money sums up to 2s.” were moved to year 3 in Non-European Registered Primary Schools. The clock remains part of the curriculum from year 3 through to year 6 in present-day Fiji.

In other words, European clock time has been around Fiji long enough to have established more than just a transitional presence (cf. Smith 1982). Correspondingly, this article argues that Fijians value time in multiple ways, and that “time” in the

1. The racialized history of wage labor and labor time in Fiji is an integral part of the issue discussed here. I have examined the historical trajectories of Fiji time in more detail elsewhere (Eräsaari, unpublished). Moreover, this history has produced a set of ethnic assumptions, which are also linked with the kinds of self-understandings discussed in this article. However, in order to avoid further stereotyping interethnic relations, I will leave discussion of these assumptions to an occasion where I can do it in more detail.



postindustrial sense can bear values even antithetical to puritan time thrift. That this should happen under conditions in which time resources appear abundant rather than scarce may sound obvious, yet it should be borne in mind that a matter of values is not just a matter of choice: one cannot simply pick one's values and expect them to have purchase. Not everyone is in a position to make “superfluous” time a thing of value.

My ethnographic focus is on Verata, a chiefdom whose claim to senior status is based on debated colonial-era mythology (Tuwere 2002; Eräsaari 2013). Verata evokes the gravitas of seniority: it is “slow but sure” in comparison to its traditional rival, the chiefdom of Bau. This provides Veratans with a specific means for converting their abundant time resources into a thing of value, a kind of dignity that references objectified indigenous tradition. Veratans are particularly well placed to uphold an alternative value system that enables them to appreciate superfluous time even as a vehicle of aristocratic virtue in a manner more reminiscent of Veblen's conspicuous leisure than of Marx's labor time.

Time as a bearer of value

In *Capital*, Marx highlights the importance of time in the quantitative process of price determination, identifying in time the “secret hidden under the apparent fluctuations in the relative values of commodities” (Marx [1887] 1999: ch. 1, section 4). He recognizes time as a standard of valuation: a measure that serves the purpose of creating relations of equivalence between things that in themselves carry no common denominator. In common Euro-American parlance, the same idea is expressed as “time is money.”

The extraordinary value of time under the capitalist mode of production is inseparable from the form we give to time as measurable units of duration. This might not altogether relativize all temporal phenomena, as Alfred Gell ([1992] 1996) shows, yet it remains a fact that capitalist time is unique in its concern with measure. This is evident in the worldwide project of standardization whereby the odd collage of solar, lunar, seven-unit, twelve-unit, and sixty-unit measures has gained an almost universal reach (see Birth 2012). These measures have traveled beyond the societies in which they were born.

The clock is a case in point. Though it was not invented by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrialists, its rise to prominence in Britain was instrumentally connected with the large-scale industrialization that occurred there. As Thompson (1967) has shown, so thorough was the ensuing change in time-orientations that in addition to widely displacing the task-based orientation that preceded it in Britain, “clock time” also changed the dissenting Methodist Church into guardians of time discipline. It made time thrift a virtue, and eventually saw even the labor movement adopt the clock-driven viewpoint, where clocks had previously been used to discipline the workforce.

In “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism” (1967), Thompson discusses at length the discrepancies between “task time” and “clock time.” Task time, so called because it estimates time through natural rhythms and the duration of tasks, is characterized by an “attitude to labour [that] appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency” (ibid.: 60). Thompson charts the ideological battle that took

place over people's time, epitomized in religious doctrines that teach the virtuous to scorn rest and leisure (also Weber [1905] 1930). He saw the shift into clock time as nearly all-encompassing; indeed so thorough that he ended up questioning people's ability to value the increasing amounts of nonworking time that they would spend in the future as a result of growing automatization: "What will be the capacity for experience of the men who have this undirected time to live?" (Thompson 1967: 95).

Thompson's question remains highly relevant, though what he queried as experience or enjoyment, I regard as human valuation. Hence my reformulation of Thompson's question is: "Could we value time as something else besides money?" With respect to the Fijian case discussed in this article, one theory of alternate valuation seems particularly relevant: Thorstein Veblen's (1899) notion of "conspicuous leisure," or the unproductive consumption of *time* practiced in order to display the ability to remain idle.

Veblen portrays conspicuous leisure as the product of a class-based need for distinction: an upper-class display of sufficient resources to not engage in productive work. But like Thompson, Veblen extends his analysis of leisured life beyond this simple point to show how this need expands into a full-blown social system that, in effect, serves to elaborate and embellish the appreciation of time. Veblen builds from the observation that the whole of the life of a gentleman (or gentlewoman) of leisure cannot be spent in public view:

He should find some means of putting in evidence the leisure that is not spent in the sight of the spectators. This can be done only indirectly, through the exhibition of some tangible, lasting results of the leisure so spent—in a manner analogous to the familiar exhibition of tangible, lasting products of the labour performed for the gentleman of leisure by handicraftsmen and servants in his employ. (Veblen 1899: ch. 3)

Veblen elaborates not just how aristocratic status is accompanied by highly time-consuming manners and requirements, but also how manners become the norm—a social fact. The aristocrat has to verify his or her propriety, and the verification of leisure status requires the services of various specialists whose job is to wait on others: the valet, the butler, and the lady's maid all serve the conceived necessities of the leisure class—the time-taking proprieties of high society.

Veblen describes this aristocratic decorum as a hierarchy of domestic servants wherein specialist skill correlates with status, and status with waiting. He argues that the further up we look upon the ranks of domestic servants, the more clearly waiting *on* someone becomes indistinguishable from just waiting. They are part of what amounts to a potlatch-style realization of value: the unproductive use, waste, or sheer destruction of time which results in a conceived sense of the unworthiness of productive work for those at the top of the pyramid. This inventive rendering of aristocratic dignities highlights a core juxtaposition of productive labor time vs. unproductive waiting. In Veblen's stratified model, social esteem is maintained by expending time nonproductively, which underlies an entire internalized temporal regime.

Veblen inverts not just Marx's idea of socially necessary labor time, but also the related notions of time discipline or the Protestant work ethic advanced by Thompson (1967) and Weber (1930), respectively. To complement an austere time



discipline, Veblen highlights what could be labeled a leisure discipline. However, Veblen regarded “conspicuous leisure” as an intermediary “stage” in what he envisaged as development toward the conspicuous consumption of money, whereas I depict “conspicuous leisure” as a contemporaneous alternative to “clock time.” Just as “leisure” is commonly defined as time free from working, so the value of displaying abundant spare time is more likely to emerge in contrast to the relative scarcity of time, “time poverty.” But the question then arises: Under what condition is the positive valuation of “time wasting” possible? Does it have to be an upper-class privilege?

Compare Veblen’s leisure to Yasmine Musharbash’s (2007) study of superfluous time in the Australian Aboriginal settlement of Yuendumu. Surplus time can hardly be glossed “leisure” in sedentarized postcolonial settlement life, inasmuch as “leisure” implies a break from work. Instead, Yuendumu surplus time turns into boredom: “killing time” with endless card games, substance abuse, and so forth. Instead of being (positively) valued, the “present becomes oppressive, like a cage in which one is caught, in which one experiences the same thing over and over again without any possibility of escape” (ibid.: 313).

Musharbash examines boredom as an explicitly modern phenomenon comparable to Thompson’s view of our inability to enjoy undirected time under clock valuation. Boredom, thus framed, can be viewed as a byproduct of a particular way of valuing time. Musharbash writes of a mismatch between Yuendumu life and irreconcilable values: positive valuation of time is hard when people extend little control over their surroundings. “Boringness” becomes a quality associated with “the insufferability of ‘it’—life, the universe, everything” (ibid.: 312). Correspondingly, one can focus on socioeconomic status to underline the ways in which privileged status allows some to talk of “investing” their time where others feel their time is “wasted” or “killed” under similar conditions (Jeffrey 2010: 75).

This article offers a further example of the valuation of time from Fiji. I present this as a point of comparison against the extremity of boredom and meaningless waiting; not in order to deny the experience of boredom in settings such as Yuendumu, but to highlight the conjuncture that allows a group of relatively marginalized people to conceive their surplus time in a positive, or at least in a not-altogether-negative, sense. The underlying assumption of this article is that it is not a simple matter of choice to allocate value to “wasted” time, but something that requires other cultural resources in order to be conceivable.

The Veratan way

Naloto village is part of the traditional chiefdom-cum-administrative division of Verata in the province of Tailevu, on the island of Viti Levu in Fiji. Naloto villagers lead a semisubsistent life just outside urban Fiji; Nausori town, the end-point of Fiji’s main metropolitan area (“the Suva–Nausori corridor”), is only an hour’s lorry ride from the village, but transport is too irregular to make permanent urban employment possible from a village base. Hence approximately three hundred people, either born or married into the village, live there practicing agriculture and fishing, and augmenting their subsistence by selling produce at the urban market

and with assistance from urban relatives. Twice as many Nalotans—roughly six hundred men and women listed at birth as members of Naloto’s landowning clans (*mataqali*)—live outside the village owing to marriage, work, or both. Residence in the village is fluid: people move in and out all the time. Excepting the immigrant village-school teachers, only two or three people have managed to take up paid employment while living in Naloto. As a rule, one has to move away from the village to be able to hold a job. Still, most urban-based Nalotans plan to settle back in the village at the end of their work careers.

Naloto is the largest of the seven villages that make up the traditional chiefdom of Verata. Roughly a mile from the paramount village of Ucunivanua, it is known for having served as the Verata paramount’s (*Ratu mai Verata*) stronghold during the Bau–Verata wars (1850). Verata, for its part, is famous for two things: first and foremost, it is the home of a chiefly lineage in which all Veratans take great pride. Owing to close affiliation with the colonial-era “Kaunitoni” migration myth (France 1966), Veratans not only claim descent from the first “king of Fiji” but are often acknowledged as such by other chieftaincies invested in this mythology. Long after losing rank to Bau, Verata maintains a particular status in indigenous Fiji. The Verata paramount is outranked by various other paramount chiefs, yet Verata’s claim to seniority persists.

Besides chiefs, Verata is also proverbially known for *solosolo vakaVerata*, or doing things slowly in the Veratan fashion. *Solosolo* means slow pace, as in *vaka-solosolo*, “slowly” (Capell [1941] 2003), but it also means “collecting” things. A 1954 phrasebook translates *solosolo vakaVerata* as something “said of a person who fiddles around and is slow in his movements” or “of one who collects a lot of small and useless articles” (Raiwalui 1954: 16–17). Nalotans and neighboring villagers often jokingly translate it as “wasting time the Verata way,” something best exemplified during funerals and other traditional events, to which Veratans can be expected to arrive hours late.

Slowness is also an observable part of the village lifestyle, while hurrying is, if not precisely frowned upon, at least something that people are uneasy with. Whether leaving to attend a funeral or just to catch a bus, every departure is always marked by an unhurried spell of waiting or “relaxing” (*cegu*), and the same applies to arrivals, meals, work efforts, and meetings. Even a sociable pastime such as kava drinking typically concludes with a spell of relaxed waiting before the drinkers can disperse and go home.

This made many Nalotans claim that time has no significance in the village, or even—as it was phrased by Maciu,² a village-based subsistence farmer in his late sixties—that *solosolo vakaVerata* means that “there is no time” in Verata. For him, “time” means discipline and punctuality. Maciu, who in his youth worked a while in Suva and overseas, associated “the Veratan way” with “Fiji time” and contrasted these to Europe, where “time is time.” “Veratan slowness” can thus be regarded a special case of and largely overlapping with the notion of “Fiji time,” including various anxieties about Fiji’s lack of progress and development, but excluding the added commodity value from the tourism industry in the Western Division.

2. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Timoci, a family man who worked in various tourism-related jobs in the Western Division before settling down in Naloto, is one of many who think time means something else in the village. His account comments on both the urban and the village-based viewpoint:

“*Na gauna na ilavo*”? [“Time is money”?] Yeah, we use that in town, in the cities, that kind of saying. . . . ‘Cause here in the village, whether you’ve got something or not, you still can survive. You’ve got everything that you can survive on without using money. Like, in town, you’ve got to work for money . . . you go to work for the time, after that comes the money. But in the village, no: you can just roam around, you come home, you eat—the food is there. Everything is there, you go out, you just get it, or somebody can get it for you. You’ve got your neighbors, your relatives, your cousins that’s living near to you.

Timoci, like many other Nalotans (cf. Eräsaari 2013: 39–44), explains the difference as affluence: “everything is there” in the village. One can always rely on the generosity of neighbors and relatives for food and other basic necessities. The villagers all partake in the *ideal* of sharing anything that is not deemed immediately necessary to its owner, though the practice is more complicated. Easy access to most basic necessities, combined with a fair availability of arable land and conditions which make at least the favored cassava grow with minimal effort, leads to what can be described as ample free time—“leisure,” as long as one remembers that leisure refers to time away from work, hence requiring a historically particular idea of work.

Whilst Timoci proves that wage labor is a well-attested reality in Fiji, the Fijian language itself does not appear to distinguish between “working,” “doing” and “employment.” Constantinos Gounis and Henry Rutz (1986: 62) illustrate the matter through the statistical oddities of the 1976 census, which ended up classifying virtually all males aged fifteen years or older as “economically active,” while, owing to the exclusion of “unpaid home duties,” women’s statistics were driven in the opposite direction. Gounis and Rutz (*ibid.*: 73) point out that the Fijian word for work, *cakacaka*, is “neither a specialized or institutionalized sector of activity nor is it restricted to the market as an exchange of labour for wage remuneration”; they further point out that “work” designates virtually any activity that is not labelled “rest,” *cegu*.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the author of “The original affluent society” is a Fiji scholar. Although Marshall Sahlins’ (1972: 1–39) essay was written with reference to hunter-gatherer populations living in particularly challenging settings, it seems apt for Fijian village phenomena too. For the way in which he defines hunter-gatherer affluence as a rejection of surplus needs is relevant for understanding Fijian village ideals as well. The vast majority of Naloto villagers articulate their ideas of a good or proper way of being as a subsistence lifestyle wherein one can produce all the necessities of life with minimal effort: food is easily available and housing can be constructed from traditional materials (should one wish to do so). And if one requires tea, sugar, or other commodities the village cannot produce, all one has to do is to ask. Money is said to be unnecessary in the village because “everything is there,” though in practice village residents use a combination of small-scale cash cropping and remittances to pay for electricity, transport, school fees,

and so on. But the village discourse ignores these expenses and thereby makes it possible to liken village life to “Paradise” (*Parataisi*). Like Sahlins’ affluent hunter-gatherers, Nalotans also “keep banker’s hours, notably less than modern industrial workers (unionized), who would surely settle for a 21–35 hour week” (ibid.: 34–35).

I have conducted two small-scale surveys on time usage in Naloto in 2007. The first was something of a failure, if an illuminating one: I asked ten households to record their daily working times and received lists of the tasks they had performed. I mention this to show that in the village, a task orientation may in many respects be more relevant than clock time. Yet it also coexists with wall clocks and prestigious wristwatches; the church, school, and transport schedules and TV program times: task and clock orientations are not binary either/or alternatives, especially for a population alternating between agrarian and urban employed livelihoods.

My second survey was too small in scale to be more than indicative of time use in the village in a very general way, but serves as an example nonetheless. To make an estimate, I spent a week surveying the amounts of time that men on the northern half of the village spent away from home—which is where most Nalotan men’s work tends to be—arriving at the rough estimate of five hours a day.

The estimate excludes men who spent an entire day resting: had I included them, I would have arrived at daily working hours of slightly below two hours per day. At the other extreme, the daily averages went up considerably owing to a fisherman who spent two nights out on the reef, sleeping in his boat with fishing lines tied to his fingers and toes. Nor does this imprecise estimate reflect the fact that weeks differ from one another, or that working hours are not evenly spread across the working week. The relaxed pace of early week picks up toward the weekend, when a number of villagers are always busy readying their produce for the Suva and Nausori marketplaces. A week preceding a traditional ceremonial event requires more working hours from the entire village community, whilst a week after tends to be more relaxed. And women spend more time on tasks that are predominantly domestic and even harder to classify apart from “nonwork”: in addition to domestic tasks like laundry and cooking, they also collect clams or forage for other foodstuff and sometimes firewood as well, plait mats, take turns preparing lunch at the village school, and so forth.

This crude estimate can nonetheless serve as a point of departure for examining how village-based men spent the abovementioned five hours. Here is an exemplary working day from October 2007, translated and condensed from my field diary:

After breakfast we relaxed a while together with Mosese and then set out for the clan’s garden lands at 9.30. Maika joined us on the road to the farms, which we reached after a 45-minute walk. We then decided to take a break by Luke’s “bush house.” After a half-hour rest other men of the clan arrived, and we rested with them for another while. After the break, some of us took word of an upcoming event to three houses, all within a stone’s throw. Exchanging news and relaxing a while took another half an hour. After relaying the messages, the group decided to move indoors to Luke’s bush house, where we relaxed for another half an hour or so. Finally, at about noon it was decided that we should get started: we walked some ten minutes into the bush until we reached the clan garden, where the younger men pulled up the cassava while the older sat nearby



supervising. This took another half an hour (we did not plant new ones to replace the old). We then sat down for a while and enjoyed a couple of green drinking coconuts before carrying the sacks back to the road, where someone suggested another break. Instead of resting, however, everyone embarked on the busiest spell of the day: climbing trees for breadfruit, collecting *ota* [an edible fern], searching for vines to tie up bundles, and so on. One and a half hours later the village lorry picked us up. We were back in the village at three o'clock; bringing the day's working time to five and a half hours.

This abundant relaxing was not an isolated occurrence: sometimes we watched movies after walking to the farms; once or twice someone even commented that people back in the village would think we had been keeping busy. The busiest days were spent accompanying individuals to their gardens without a crowd of fellow-villagers, but relaxing was always part of work all the same—and that applied to women's work, too.

The Fijian word for resting—*vakacegu*—is derived from the root word *cegu*, “to breathe,” “to take a break.” It connotes both resting after an exhausting activity as well as more generally taking it easy, but the villagers usually translate it as “relaxing.” The term *vakacegu* also carries religious connotations: while in North European Protestantism, one “rests in peace” only in the afterlife (and toils hard in the present one), Fijian Methodism often seeks to assert resting or relaxing as virtues in this world. In Naloto Methodist Church sermons, *vakacegu*³ is contrasted to undesirable rapid change, whilst both the Methodist Hymnbook and even the Pentecostal gospel groups' repertoires abound with references to rest and resting. And of course there are the endless debates on the Sunday Sabbath. As Henry Rutz and Erol Balkan (1992) have pointed out, the Sunday Observance Decree, which declared Sunday a sacred day for everyone in Fiji irrespective of their religious background, was one of the first political actions taken by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka following his 1987 military coup. The Sunday ban has been a recurring topic for political debate ever since, and was endorsed again by the Methodist Church annual conference in 2007, only months after the December 2006 coup.

To highlight the contrast: the famous (North European) Protestant work ethic (Weber [1905] 1930) puts rest beyond this world—gives it an outworldly orientation (Dumont [1986] 1992: 23–59)—while the Fijian ideal of *vakacegu* requires obeisance in this world, too. The church elders in the village preach on the merits of resting; the villagers repeatedly praise village life for the rest it affords. Indeed, when a villager employed outside the village retires—*vakacegu*—he or she at least expects to do so moving back into the village (see, e.g., Overton 1993, who calls Fijian villages “retirement homes”).⁴ *Vakacegu*, relaxing, is also something that is offered to honored guests in the village. And though hard work, too, is highly valued there, young men, in particular, who try to spend too much time working can easily become subject to jokes from their peers.

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3. The word covers a range of meanings, from relaxing and resting to what might be best translated as “serenity,” “peacefulness,” and so forth.
 4. *Vakacegu* is also used to relay news of a death, and some urban employed Nalotans associate village retirement with “waiting for death.”

Leveling with time

Fijian words for busyness, *oga* and *ososo*, both indicate being busy with people. The first implies traditional ceremonial obligations and hence is often synonymous with worry, the latter means being crowded with people. Busyness implies the bustle of ceremonial events, everyone working day and night. But these collective efforts also reflect an ideal that allocates more time for relaxing when there is no particular reason to work hard.

At one extreme there is collective work (*solesolevaki, lala*) organized under traditional *vanua* protocol with chiefly leadership and customary reciprocal obligations.⁵ This mode of organization is used for large-scale work such as house building or clearing new gardens, typically with the presence of senior men to provide an air of respectability, and with kava provided at various stages of the work effort to the same effect. Often this gives collective labor an inefficient appearance: junior men work in short shifts interrupted by tea breaks and “breathers” (*cegu*), senior men give support to the work effort, while women take turns providing food and refreshments to wherever the work takes place. But as a retired Nalotan teacher pointed out, collective labor is a way to accomplish efforts too big for one man or household. With no wages or other rewards save for the kava at the end of the day, it would be pointless to push people to toil harder. The work will be done “slowly but surely”—which is another way to translate *solosolo vakaVerata*.

Henry Rutz (1984) has studied the phenomenon in terms of the time resources expended on house building. In an article that seeks to explain the popularity of the inferior “modern” (corrugated iron) house type in village Fiji, he contrasts the “social time” of ceremonial work with “budgeting time according to the clock” to argue that the social value of work according to traditional protocol counterbalances the efficiency of modern housebuilding. But in choosing the “tin” house, Rutz argues, the household unit takes control of its own time resources (*ibid.*: 113–15).⁶

In Naloto village, time is regularly treated as a communal resource rather than a simple matter of individual or household-level decision making. Time often finds a parallel in land, which in indigenous villages is held communally by kin groups (*mataqali*). Here one is reminded of Tim Ingold’s ([1995] 2000) suggestion that time may be embedded not just in the tasks people carry out but also in the social groups that perform the tasks. This is evident in ceremonial collective labor.

But even ordinary joint efforts like visiting the clan’s common gardens tend to be conducted at a relatively slow pace, sometimes alluded to as “eating the time” (*kania na gauna*). Compared to this, working on one’s own is efficient, and typically when one needs to get more work done—for example, get produce ready for the urban market—one does not ask others for help, except household members.

The idea that effective work is conducted on one’s own is evidenced in Nalotan lifecycle patterns, too. Young families often have to move outside the village perimeters for a period to accumulate the resources for a house, children’s schooling, and other expenses. The decision is always explained in terms of efficient time

5. On the difference between *vanua*, *koro*, and *lotu* organization in Naloto, see Eräsaari (2013: 112–13); on *vanua* ideology, see Tuwera (2002); Nabobo-Baba (2006).

6. In Naloto, “tin houses” are also built collectively.

utilization: living away from the village proper, close to one's gardens in a so-called “bush house” (*vale ni veikau*), one goes to sleep early, wakes up early, and concentrates on farming rather than storytelling and kava drinking. Ideally, a young farmer living next to his farm ought to wake up at five in the morning and leave the house when the sun rises, work until it gets too hot, then have lunch and rest until the weather cools down in the afternoon, and work again until it gets dark before an evening meal with the family. Young housewives, likewise, are busy working on their own while possibly also attending small children. Though most families who strike out on their own expect to do so for a fixed period—a year or two—the motivation for moving out into the “bush” is always expressed in terms of better time management. For young men this includes avoiding kava drinking and storytelling, group activities which are virtually inescapable when living within the village boundaries.

In the village, time use is subject to a greater deal of peer pressure, which may even amount to a kind of leveling. Jokes and remarks are addressed to people who are seen as toiling too hard. But social pressure on time use is best evidenced in kava drinking, an activity where it is easy to lose face in front of one's peers. Young men are particularly prone to take each other's slights seriously, to the degree where leaving a company of kava drinkers before others gets very difficult. Even senior men are not immune to this: I have seen a seventy-year-old clan elder, aching with fever, being pressured by his peers to join the kava circle.

Besides the kava drinking that accompanies storytelling in the evenings, simply calling someone over or otherwise engaging him or her is a thing that cannot be ignored without a proper excuse. There is even a Fijian word for seizing or “tying up” someone else's time: *vesumona* (lit. “tying the brain,” with a wide range of meanings extending from “hypnotizing” to “seduction”). Joeli, a married man in his early forties, defined *vesumona* as keeping somebody tied up for one's own ends against his or her will. Akuila, a few years his junior, defined *vesumona* as “taking somebody else's time.”

He provides an extreme example of *vesumona*. On a Friday evening in October 2007, Akuila—back then in his early thirties and father to a small baby—was preparing his garden produce for the market in town when a group of young men walked up to his house demanding to buy kava. Knowing where this would lead, he tried to tell them that he had none, but failed because they had earlier seen him drying kava roots outside his house. The men hence produced 12 FJD and demanded to buy twelve bags, making Akuila pestle the entire amount for them. Once the task was finished, they told him to produce a mixing bowl. Akuila still tried to refuse, whereupon they told him they would drink their kava in his house nonetheless. Since he considered this an unacceptable alternative, he had no option but to host the group as demanded until the small hours.

At the informal level of young cross-cousins' joking relationships, this is simply considered light-hearted pranking, as my interlocutors were keen to explain. No one is forcing anyone; there is always a choice—you either host the kava session and earn the good esteem of your cross-cousins, or you go on and do what you have to in order to earn your children's upkeep, though you thereby risk the spite (*kakase*, gossip) of your peers, as village-based Mosese explained to me. Which, of course, is how social scientists typically describe the experience of peer pressure.

Normal kava drinking works in a similar fashion. Quitting a kava session (*talanoa*, “yarning”) before others requires permission: making the request may in itself be considered embarrassing, but it is also entirely possible that one will not be granted “release” (*tatau*) by one’s peers, which would certainly make the requester the object of others’ jokes. The typical course of action for young men in particular is to “flee” (*dro*) without asking permission if they cannot take the drink anymore or otherwise need to leave. But since this also leaves the one who flees open to all kinds of jokes, it is a course of action rarely adopted: most of the time the majority of drinkers finish together. This applies particularly to young men, but no one is exempt from the pressure to stay in company; it is a matter of respect, people often explained to me.

Kava induces a pleasant, drowsy atmosphere for storytelling and good company, but there comes a point in most informal, pastime kava sessions whereupon everyone is too sleepy for conversation, people doze off against the walls or just sit in silence interrupted only by the occasional request to “please tell a story” (*talanoa mada*). If villagers usually give kava drinking and storytelling as prime examples of “eating time,” it is worth asking: Whose time is being eaten in the kava ring? The fear of ridicule and corresponding pressure to conform are also the prime mechanisms of what village youth call “spoiling”: “pulling” or “bringing down” someone at the brink of an accomplishment, comparable to chasing away a school of fish rather than allowing another to catch it (see Eräsaari 2013: 47–52).

Obviously, remaining in company is also a matter of respect, not just toward one’s fellow-villagers but toward received protocol as well. Kava drinking is a fundamentally chiefly, hierarchical activity, and even if Nalotans every so often disregard the actual chiefs themselves, the ritualized formality of the kava circle lends itself to an air of respect and dignity that is best described as “chiefly” (*vakaturaga*). From the visible pride of the youths allowed to participate in the first place to the pride which men display serving the drink or the pride of someone being allowed the first cup, a kava session is an event in which one does not just lose face but also wins esteem. One of my village interlocutors even likened kava to a work career: “Some dream about a good job in town; others dream of getting respect by drinking *yaqona* [kava].”

But a career in kava drinking is also frowned upon. Marika, a Lautoka-based man from Naloto whose career was made in the tourist industry, once criticized the village as a whole for being “asleep,” staying inactive when villagers ought to strive toward development. This is a common enough critique of village life, typically voiced by the urban employed. Over the course of the conversation, Marika went on to castigate his village kin for trying to aggrandize themselves in the kava ring: “Today, everybody wants to be the chief, to drink first.” In so doing he was evoking another popular criticism, one most commonly heard at the end of a disapproving account of the state of affairs in the community: *levu na vievie turaga*, “so many want to be chiefs” or “people do not know their place anymore.” He was, in short, criticizing the villagers for not being ambitious enough and for being too ambitious—or for misdirecting their energies.

The “chiefly” or status aspect of kava drinking is only one facet in the complex valuation of time that takes place in the village. Certainly the leveling of time points in an opposite direction, and no one dreams of claiming rank on the basis



of relaxing at the plantation. Yet it is also true that a slow, deliberate comportment goes with seniority and positions of rank, such as that of the elder supervising collective work or the chiefly kava. They are examples of an ideology which, at the top of the hierarchy, associates paramount chiefs with stasis—“just sitting still” (Sahlins 2004: 60; Tomlinson 2014: 58). And it is because of the cultural values expressed in such ceremonialized articulations that the high appreciation of a dignified, leisurely comportment may also be expressed as coercive behavior. It is almost as if the village enforced relaxation on its inhabitants to parallel the decorum of more formal contexts. This may even appear as a norm capable of exerting external constraint upon individuals: a schoolteacher from the neighboring province, for example, explained that not resting awhile with others after completing a kava session would feel like an offense—he would “start to feel bad.”

Verata in the blood

As noted above, Veratans regard their chieftom senior among the chieftaincies of eastern Fiji and the former seat of power of a mythical king of Fiji. Verata appears to have once been a ruling power in historical terms, too, though its authority has been declining for centuries (on Verata, see, e.g., Tuwere 2002; Sahlins 2004; Eräsaari 2013). Sahlins portrays Verata as a “kingdom of [the] blood” (*matanitu ni dra*) vis-à-vis Verata’s ancient enemy, the powerful but genealogically junior chieftom of Bau, the “kingdom of force” (*matanitu ni kaukauwa*). The two stand for different, coexisting ideologies of political justification: Verata for the gravitas of seniority and Bau for the *celeritas* of force (Sahlins 2004: 67–68). This was recently evidenced by prophecies that circulated Fiji in the aftermath of the 2006 military coup, which claimed that Fiji would only know peace once a true chief emerged from Verata. Similarly, a Naloto clan elder once explained to me that *solosolo vakaVerata* indicates “proper discussion” and “fairness”: decision making that leaves no one unhappy.

Discussing the topic of time with a group of senior Naloto men in 2015, they collectively rejected the translation for *solosolo vakaVerata* that people had used in 2007. It does not mean “wasting time,” they explained, but rather that someone is well prepared: “slow but sure.” This echoes the explanations that were taught in Fijian schools and phrasebooks (Raiwalui 1954). *Solosolo vakaVerata* used to be part of the established curriculum on Fijian traditions, taught alongside the old myths pertaining to Verata—the first king of Fiji, the running contest to determine his successor, the stolen whale’s tooth that was the mark of the king’s authority, and Verata’s fall from power. I asked the group of senior men if it is significant that one does things slowly in the “Veratan way”—why not talk about, for example, *solosolo vakaBau*—acting slowly in the Bauan way? After a moment’s stunned silence, everyone hastened to point out that Bau is known for a different thing—*vere vakaBau* (sometimes also *politiki vakaBau*)—plotting or scheming in the Bauan fashion.

In saying that venerable old Verata should be known for slow but sure action, the villagers were also assigning a stately dignity to slowness. Not only does it yield better decisions (one of the men exemplified the point by referencing the film *Home alone*, where haste causes a child being left home unattended), by contrasting Veratan slowness with Bauan rashness in a conversation that carried on to the

following day, they also indicated that chiefly authority reflects these characteristics, inasmuch as both chieftaincies are encompassed and personified by their paramount chiefs. Much like Geertz's ([1983] 2000) analysis of the various guises in which authority or charisma appears, we could say that Veratans depict chiefly-ness as slow. The reverse—imagining slowness as chiefly—is contestable, however.

Most of the time, the village is home to just one-third of the people registered as Naloto landowners, and while the majority of village-based Nalotans seem to value relaxing and a slow pace, many emigrant villagers express the opposite view. In the village, where people predominantly live off the land, it is a common assumption that many urban residents “eat money” (*kana ilavo*) in town—they eat into their earnings by having to pay for food, rent, and things they would get for free in the village. The idiom has a double meaning, though, since “eating money” also means wasting it, and what is more, the implication often is that one who is “eating money” is wasting it for personal indulgence whilst it ought to have benefited the entire community. From the communal viewpoint, “eating money” means “using money that does not belong to you,” as one man defined it. Hence to understand the implications of the ideal of sharing, it is necessary to keep in mind that even long-term urban residents such as Adriu, a middle-class insurance sales representative from Lautoka town, say that “all your income's not all only yours. You have to share it. . . . Because you know, at the end of . . . one day you go back to the village.” The critique of “eating money” thus echoes the ideals of a community where sharing remains the morally acceptable thing to do with any surplus, even if in practice the issue is more complicated.

But it is also possible to criticize villagers' time use in similar terms: the village is “asleep” where it should be developing; the villagers are “eating time” (*kania na gauna*) where they ought to be striving to make improvements. “Doing something that's worthless or nothing,” as a former tourist resort employee explained to me the notion of “eating time”. Joji, a man in his late thirties trying to earn his child's upbringing at a “bush house” outside the village, explained in 2015:

Kania na gauna, eh? Like we sleep all days. We're doing something meaningless or worthless, like staying home, relaxing. . . . *Kania na gauna* means you just stay home watching video or maybe drinking *yaqona*. . . . Yes, that's famous for the village people [i.e. “villagers are famous for”]. Because that's what we do. But that's something you have to . . . like . . . to move up from, the wasting time.

The descriptions of emigrant Nalotans highlight the degree to which *solosolo vaka-Verata* encapsulates the coercive power of a Durkheimian social fact. While village-based Nalotans are more likely to translate *solosolo VakaVerata* as “slow but sure,” “slow and steady,” or “well prepared,” emigrant villagers are more likely to explain it as lateness, excessive kava drinking, and missed opportunities. The double meaning of the idiom was illustrated during a three-way conversation with a Naloto clan chief (*turaga ni mataqali*) in Suva in 2016: he was explaining *solosolo vakaVearata* as “slow, steady, and good,” while his daughter, laughing, kept on interrupting her father to tell me it means “*berabera*”—“slow” or “late.” A Nadi-based Naloto migrant explained that *solosolo vakaVerata* refers to the ancestral times when a Veratan army reached the battlefield too late and therefore lost to Bau.



But these views are not a simple village vs. town binary; the population of Naloto is constantly shifting. Yet the village can be persuasive. I once interviewed a freshly returned immigrant from the Western Division who, during the interview, explained the Veratan way as time wasting and tardiness, but a week later told me that it actually means preparedness. The head of the Methodist Agricultural School near Nausori town also acknowledges the power that village Fiji has; the school, he told me, monitors its graduates after they leave school to keep them from backsliding. Even after years of disciplined time management, they may still “end up wasting time; drinking grog [i.e., kava], *solevu* [ceremonial events]. . . . One ceremony today, another the next day,” as he described the domestic life of the school’s former pupils.

These pressures often extend beyond the village. Three Nalotan women, all living away from the village, defined *solosolo vakaVerata* independently of one another as something that they carry “in their blood”. One of them was Laisani, a middle-class civil servant from Lautoka town who left the village more than fifteen years ago, during which time she has converted to one of the prosperity churches and back to Methodism. She explained in 2015:

Most of the time, I’m on that mode. Like, I always have it with me, but I want to quit of it. Most of the time most people told me: “You shouldn’t do it. Come on. Does not matter that you’re from Verata when you act slow like that. Now it’s . . . times change. You should switch your time to this time, don’t always late, late, late.” . . . It’s not a good thing. But it’s like inside of me. . . . In the blood.

It is easy to hear echoes of Thompson (1967) on the emergence of time discipline here, or Weber on the Protestant work ethic. Such critiques of Veratan time juxtapose slowness with propriety, improvement, and progress. The Methodist Church took a particularly active part in this discourse in its early twentieth-century efforts to give birth to the “Fijian Methodist industrial man” (Close-Barry 2015: 94). The establishment of vocational schools in particular was intended to teach Fijians the dignity of work and industrious habits as the means for “every individual to reach the fullest all-round development of which he is capable” (Rev. L. M. Thompson, in Education Commission 1926: 67–68). The emphasis on the work ethic survives in exemplars like Hymn 360 of the Wesleyan Hymn Book, originally written for the Davuilevu Boys’ School by the Methodist educator R. A. Derrick:

So, ra dau nanuma wale (some people have idle thoughts);
Nodra mamarau e dai (enjoying the day);
Gunu wale, veimau tiko (just drinking, playing);
Vakaoti gauna mai (wasting time away).
Sega tu na toro cake (there’s no progress);
E na sala ca ko ya (in that bad way);
Vu ni noda lutu sobu (the reason of our downfall);
Bula gogo, madua (feebleness and shame)

But as I have tried to show above, the idea that idleness leads to moral decay is (to a degree) counterbalanced by a *gravitas* of unhurried action, which makes the positive valuation of relaxing possible. To frame the matter differently, the two ways of relating

to time can also be regarded as a value conversion of sorts: the people engaged in wage work convert their labor time into money, whilst people who cannot do this get something else for theirs. I like to think of this “something” as a form of dignity in reference to Susana Narotzky’s (2016) work on Spanish popular calls for dignity and social worth by people who are otherwise regarded as surplus to requirements.

Convertibility of time

Often “value conversion” is used interchangeably with “substitution” in a way that points toward commodity exchange and relations between things (e.g., Thomas 1995). With regard to time, this echoes the classic Marxist theory: in *Capital* ([1887] 1999) it is not the use value of a thing, nor ultimately even the material costs, that dictate the prices of commodities exchanged in the market. Rather, exchange value is derived from the amount of labor time spent in the production of a thing. From this point of view, time is necessary for estimating the value of a commodity; time is what makes disparate things substitutable with one another in the market.

Yet time carries other values as well, though these may have little to do with the commensuration of things. These would be better discussed in terms of Louis Dumont’s ([1986] 1992: 237) use of “value” as “a word that allows us to consider the most diverse estimations of the good,” though maintaining C. A. Gregory’s (1997: 7–33) emphasis on coeval valuations. Gregory reminds us of the constant switching between systems that people are prone to do: “Human beings are never trapped in a single set of values” (ibid.: 8)—though neither can they fully disengage from these systems.

Alfred Gell ([1992] 1996) has highlighted the relevance of multiple valuations with regard to superfluous time. In his view, it is other, feasible worlds that make us capable of even talking about “wasting” or “killing” time:

We say things like “Henry spent the afternoon killing time,” which suggests that the afternoon in question was surplus to Henry’s requirements. But what this really means is that Henry had to wait out the afternoon, engaging in irksome, obligatory, underfinanced consumption, when in another world, he could have been engaged in activities more to his taste. . . . It is not the “objective” facts which make time surplus or deficient; “surplus” time is simply time which we have to spend doing X when we would rather be doing Y. (Gell [1992] 1996: 211)

The example Gell uses to elaborate his point is Sahlins’ (1972) interpretation of Charles Mountford’s 1960 Arnhem Land data. Sahlins labels the time-rich Arnhem Landers “affluent,” whilst Peter Just (1980) would label them “unemployed.” In Gell’s Justian interpretation, the Arnhem Landers “invest a lot of time in low-cost consumption, hanging about, conversation, football, etc. . . . the Arnhem-landers have such a leisurely lifestyle because they are poor, not because they are affluent” (Gell [1992] 1996: 213). Gell then goes on to deny Just’s view, too, pointing out that in order to be “unemployed,” one would have to at some level be able to entertain the hopes of employment, a condition he thinks does not apply to the Arnhem Landers in question.



Gell's idea of the value of time is thus defined by the existence of another, alternative set of activities that one has to be able to imagine substituting for whatever one is presently doing. Compare this to Yasmine Musharbash (2007: 315), who describes Yuendumu boredom as a mix of being “neither-there-anymore” (the boredom-free presettlement past) and “not-there-at-all” (the mainstream), showing how a sense of entrapment outside these worlds creates boredom.

There are traces of similar issues from colonial Fiji. “The Fijian now finds himself with a large amount of leisure time for which he has little or no use,” D. W. Hoodless warned in 1926 (Education Commission 1926: 91), claiming indigenous Fijians lacked “hobbies” owing to the discontinuation of traditional crafts. “The majority [of schooled Fijian boys] are idle because there are no vacancies in the clerical line for which they have been trained,” warned the Bua district chief Ratu Deve Toganivalu (ibid.: 93). Even “the modern Suva Fijian girl” required “something at which she can work in her spare time,” wrote Miss Tolley (1932: 7) of the Methodist mission. Yet I have never heard anyone complaining of boredom in twenty-first-century Fiji. Nor I have ever heard Nalotans expressing discontent with surplus time under other labels.

I have elsewhere (Eräsaari 2013: 44–56) discussed village discontentment as summed up by a family man in his late thirties whose career in the capital had failed. He called the village “the last place,” a fallback option when all other options had been exhausted. But as he himself hastened to emphasize, he was only speaking for himself; not everyone shares his evaluation. Yet, although there is an undeniably growing division now between the haves and have-nots, this does not divide people into “time investors” and “time wasters,” as in Craig Jeffrey's (2010) description from India. Naloto villagers are constantly evaluating village life in comparison to life in town or overseas. Typically, a paradisiacal view of village life is constructed vis-à-vis the expenses of life in town: “In town everything costs money, in the village everything is free.” At the same time, the urban consumer lifestyle remains something Nalotans look up to as an achievement; even the *nouveau riche*, *vucuniyau* (“brimming with wealth”), are not scorned as much as respected, to a degree where even Paradise may appear a second choice. The “time surplus” available in Naloto might not translate into similar riches. But it does not constitute the worthless here-and-now of unemployment or boredom either.

Conclusions

In this article, I have looked at the notion of *solosolo vaka Verata* using Veblen's idea of conspicuous leisure as a framework against which one can see how superfluous time can be valued. From the value of rest and relaxing to the use of time as a medium for leveling, “surplus” time can be seen as a bearer of value well beyond mere unrealized labor or an absence of activity. Like in Veblen's model, so in Naloto, too, the value of time is “systematized” in interpersonal relations. The coercive power of leisure time offers an easy route to affirming its continuing relevance: attempts to denounce the leisure discipline make it only more tangible. It persists “in the blood.”

In Naloto village, the positive connotations of *solosolo vakaVerata* are expressed in terms of “careful preparation,” “leaving nothing behind,” and reliability; ideals that may also be associated with Fijian tradition vis-à-vis a counterpart constructed out of the market economy, urbanization, Indo-Fijians, or simply change. But I have argued here that Verata, as a case in point, goes beyond that to provide a particular legitimating component. The expression *solosolo vakaVerata* evokes an idea of chiefliness, though not realized as Veblenian distinction as much as a positive alternative that complements Gell’s negative, boredom-creating alternate worlds.

“The Veratan way” could not be exactly like “conspicuous leisure,” a concept that emphasizes aristocratic entitlement together with the need for distinction. Moreover, neither the chieftom of Verata nor the people of Naloto have the authority to enforce such ideals on the world surrounding them. The villagers may evoke chiefliness in a referential sense to dignify slowness, but this hardly means that others have to agree to slowness as value. Indeed, the career-making urbanites with whom I have discussed the matter were more likely to condemn their Naloto-based relatives’ delusions of grandeur and their “sleeping” village than to uphold the status of *solosolo vakaVerata* as a recognizable “good.”

Whether this should be discussed as stubborn insularity, “resistance,” a postcolonial reflex, or a subaltern value system of the Nalotans discussed here is beyond the scope of this article. Here I only want to point out the remarkableness of the feat: to be able to hold up such a valuation using the very medium—time—that has been the vehicle of market valuation and discipline requires rare circumstances. In a politically peripheral village such as Naloto, a career with a good salary and a pension fund carries prestige of a different order. But in a village where, I have repeatedly understood, most adults would happily swap village life for a good job in town, *solosolo vakaVerata* appears to rescue a degree of dignity for those who have been left behind by their wealthier urban relatives.

Ultimately, this is what ought to make “wasting time in the Veratan way” interesting beyond just the ethnographer’s curiosity. Regardless of the fact that the value extracted out of surplus time in Naloto remains contested—actually seems to be worthless outside Naloto?—it remains that Nalotans, unlike many other peripheral, displaced, or “reserve” communities, manage to realize the value of their surplus time in their own terms.

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“Perdre son temps,” façon Veratan: le loisir ostentatoire et la valeur de l'attente à Fiji

Cet article explore le temps comme vecteur de valeur à Fiji à travers l'analyse de l'abondance du temps libre. L'analyse ethnographique est menée auprès de la chefferie Fijienne de Verata, où l'appréhension de la lenteur, de la préparation, de la relaxation et même de la “perte de temps” illustre une alternative à l'estimation du temps abstraite et fondée sur le travail. Cet article fixe sa focale sur le village de Naloto situé tout juste en dehors de l'aire métropolitaine de Fiji, et qui comprend une communauté hétéroclite de travailleurs salariés de la ville et de villageois permanents sans accès au travail salarié. L'article suggère que de leur point de vue, la perte de temps n'est peut-être pas aussi précieuse qu'un emploi stable à la ville, mais est néanmoins un vecteur de valeur.

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