

FIJI

Songs of Love and Homeland: String Band Music



From island villages of Fiji in the Melanesian South Pacific, the songs known as *sere ni cumu* are music of a special time and place. These 1986 recordings represent social songs that brought life and togetherness to the beer- or kava-drinking gatherings of the 1920s and beyond. Drawing from pre-European texts and music styles, as well as European melodies and harmonies and ukulele and guitar accompaniment, they mark the sound of Fiji village life of their era. 58 minutes, 22-page notes.

This is a previously-unpublished volume of the UNESCO Collection of Traditional Music, which was transferred to the Smithsonian to keep the series publicly available.





The Vatulawa Trio (Iliesa Koroi, Ifireimi Wailaea, and Viliame Lekai) and Noa, Iliesa's elder brother and the lead guitarist. 1986.

COVER PHOTO:
The Vatulawa Trio: Iliesa Koroi, Ifireimi Wailaea, and Viliame Lekai. Dreketi village, Qamea island. 1986.

Tracks

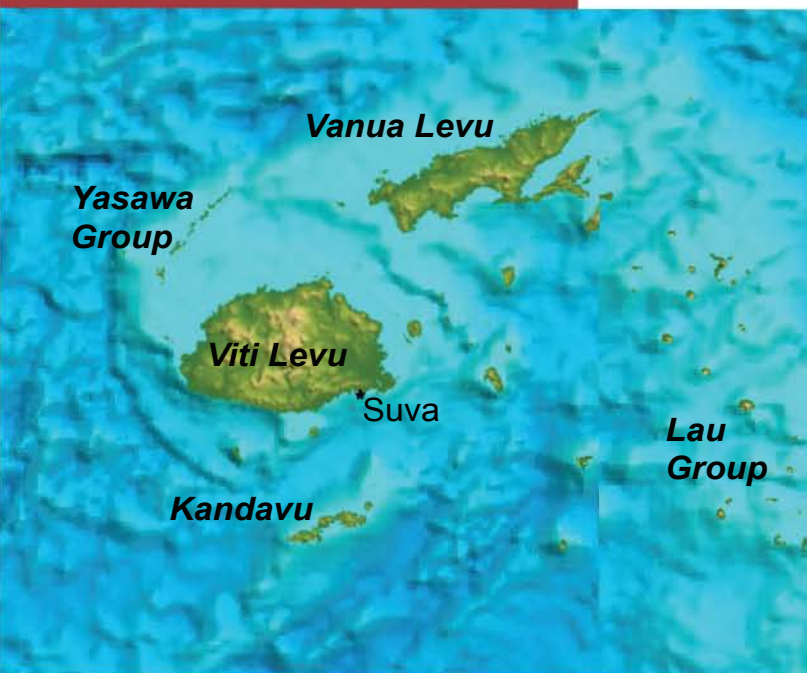
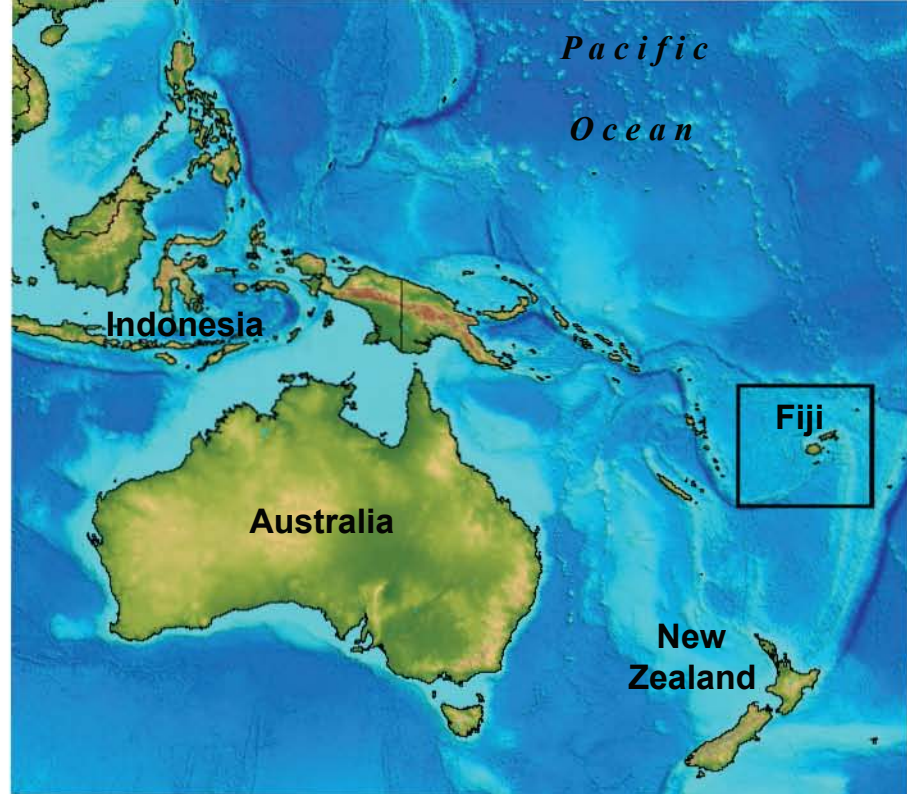
1. **Kauti Au Ena Vakacegu** (Lead me gently to my resting place)
Vatulawa Trio 3:09
2. **Isa Lei Ko Iteni** (Beautiful Eden)
Vatulawa Trio 4:00
3. **Luvuci Au** (I am touched with grief)
Vatulawa Trio 4:03
4. **Lewe Kei na Sui** (Flesh and bone)
Vatulawa Trio 3:47
5. **Na Tagi na Rarawa** (Your tears of sorrow)
Vatulawa Trio 4:12
6. **Marama** (Ladies)
Vatulawa Trio 2:07
7. **Unaisi Kautoga**
Vatulawa Trio 3:17
8. **Au Mai Kidavaki** (You welcome me)
Vatulawa Trio 2:30

- 9. Sa Rogo Levu na Noqu Vanua** (My land was famous)
Baidamudamu village group 4:01
- 10. Ko Lomaloma** (Lomaloma)
Vuna village group 2:22
- 11. Noqu Vanua** (My island)
Solovola village group 5:52
- 12. Au Bau Via Talanoa** (I want to tell a story)
Naselesele village group 3:02
- 13. Ko Droka na Bogi** (The night masquerader)
Dreketi (Qamea) village group 2:21
- 14. Au na Viriya** (I will build)
Caucau ni na Somo group 3:24
- 15. Ni Rogoca Mada na Noqu i Talanoa** (Please hear my story)
Baidamudamu village group 2:34
- 16. Turaga ni Nanumi Viti** (Lord remember Fiji)
Caucau ni Delai Tabana 2:45
- 17. Ke Ko Dovu** (If you were sugarcane)
Waica village group 1:21
- 18. Talanoa ni Noqu Koro** (Story of my village)
Vuna village band 3:45

**Fiji: Songs of Love
and Homeland:
String Band Music**

Annotated by David

Maps of Fiji

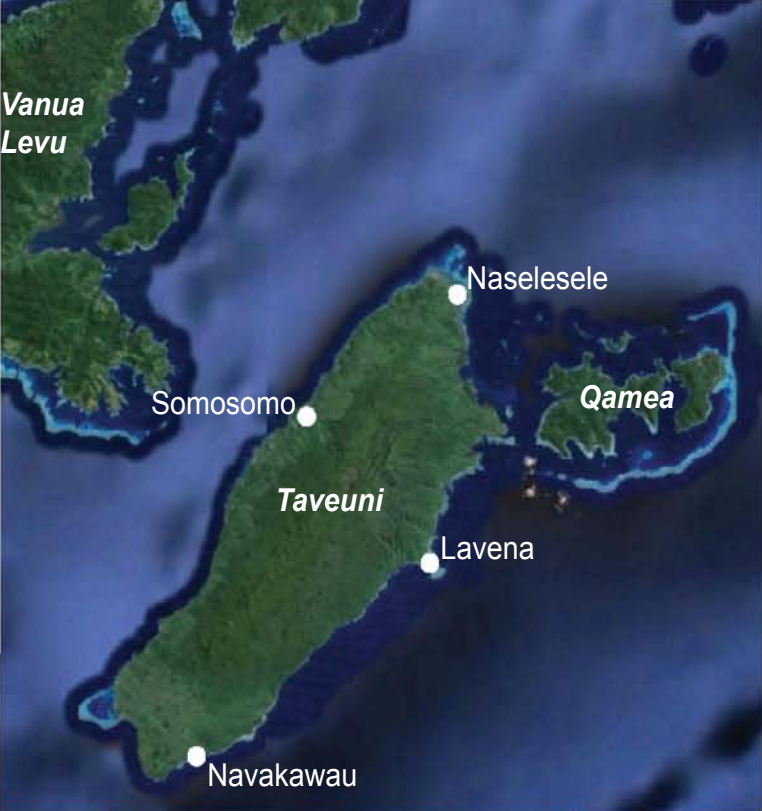


The tracks on this album were all recorded during January and February 1986 in Fijian villages during a field trip by Dr. David Goldsworthy and Mr. Meli Tuqota. All songs belong to the genre of Fijian popular music called *sere ni cumu* and provide a sample of songs of this genre as performed over 25 years ago.

Fiji: The Land and the People

Fiji is an independent nation (1970) with a population of approximately 890,000 almost evenly divided between two main ethnic groups—Fijian Melanesians and Asian Indians. Fiji comprises 332 islands located in the South Pacific Ocean at the confluence of eastern Melanesia and western Polynesia. Only 100 islands are inhabited.

There are five major island groups: the largest are Viti Levu (with the capital, Suva, and main international airport at Nadi) and Vanua Levu. The other major island groups are Kadavu, Lau, and Yasawa. These recordings come from Kadavu (the southernmost of the five major island groups), and Taveuni and Qamea, which are two relatively small Fijian islands in the Northern (administrative) Division, situated off the south-east coast of the large island of Vanua Levu.



Fijian culture has a stratified and rigorously codified social system. A network of chiefs and paramount chiefs still wields a significant degree of control over land ownership and native political affairs. Fijians are mostly Christian today; indigenous Fijian religion was based on a pantheon of local deities as well as more generally recognized ancestral spirits. The majority of Fijian villagers (including the performers recorded in the album) are farmers and/or fishermen. Music and dance performances are generally held for ceremonial or recreational purposes; some groups perform for a living in the tourist industry at resorts and clubs.

Music and Dance in Fiji

Fijian music is primarily vocal and text-based, and instruments are usually only used for rhythmic or chordal accompaniment. A close inter-relationship exists between text, music, and dance.

Group performance in several vocal parts is the preferred practice. Songs often have known composers, although accreditation of authorship applies principally to the lyrics rather than the music in some cases. The tradition is orally transmitted; words of songs, however, may exist in written form. The melodies of modern religious and secular music are occasionally notated through tonic sol-fa or Western staff notation.

Fijian musical culture embraces three main streams—traditional chant/dance (centered on the *meke*), Christian religious music, and popular music.

Meke are indigenous Fijian narrative songs/dances, including the famous spear and club standing dances for men, the women's standing dance (*seasea*), and the ever popular seated dance, the *vakamalolo*, for either gender. *Meke* are performed for a variety of ceremonial and social occasions. Hand and arm movements explicate the text of a choral



A *meke* performance on Qamea Island. Note the circular formation of the singing group behind the seated dancers. 1986.

chant—typically a narrow-ranged melody set in block harmonic style to a triple-based rhythm, accompanied by handclapping and a slit drum (*lali*).

There are four main types of Fijian church music—*same*, *taro*, *polotu*, and *sere ni lotu*. *Taro* (catechism) and *same* (psalms) have Fijian-language biblical texts and are performed a cappella in traditional Fijian chant style by mainly female groups. *Polotu* and *sere ni lotu* (church songs), on the other hand, are not related to the chant style of *same* and *taro*, and their triadic melodic/harmonic style has clear European musical roots.

Popular music includes both urban electric bands or solo artists performing original material or Fijian-style versions of Western popular music (mainstream pop, rock, country and western, and especially reggae), as well as acoustic string band groups in Fijian villages and towns, playing an older tradition of songs called *sere ni cumu*. Apart from the use of electric instruments, urban bands feature modern upbeat rhythms, and a wider range of harmonies than older *sere ni cumu* songs. The songs may also be used to accompany modern, Western-style dancing.

Sere ni cumu occurs more frequently and is the more popular form of music-making in Fijian villages. The texts and tunes of these songs are usually Fijian-composed and retain aspects of pre-European-contact Fijian musical traditions, but, as in other popular music traditions in the Pacific, borrow and incorporate Western musical ideas and structures to some extent. It developed over the last 80 years in Fiji under the influence of European and American popular music, and, although related to other Polynesian popular string band traditions by common text themes, instruments, and European-derived melodic/harmonic features, Fijian *sere ni cumu* exhibits its own individual linguistic and musical traits.



Informal *yaqona* (kava) drinking session. 1986.

Fijian Popular Music: *Sere ni Cumu* ("Songs for Bumping")

History and social context

The history of *sere ni cumu* is not clearly documented. Some Fijian musicians associate the rise of the *sere ni cumu* style with the first officially sanctioned

sales of beer to native Fijians in the 1920s. For the first time, Fijians were officially permitted to buy and drink beer in public, and several bars were opened during that period. The term "songs for bumping" may refer to the traditional context for singing such songs, drinking parties where men would sit around, singing songs and drinking, clinking or bumping their cups or glasses together. According to Paul Geraghty, it refers specifically to the practice of Fijian men sitting in a circle at a table, resting their heads against their tankards of beer (Cattermole 2006). Other terms for this genre also exist; these include *sigidrigi* (sing-drink), and *sere ni verada* (veranda songs). The latter term refers to the veranda of a house, where the drinking and singing take place. Many of the *sere ni cumu* tunes still popular in Fijian villages were composed during World War II, an intense period of creativity for this genre.

In many Fijian villages, *sere ni cumu* are traditionally associated with informal *yaqona* (kava) drinking sessions, which may last well into the night, even until dawn. At such sessions, *sere ni cumu* may be spontaneously performed by members of the village who have gathered to share a bowl of *yaqona*. Such group singing is a shared community experience, designed to engender group solidarity as well as pass away the evening leisure hours. Today, *sere ni cumu* are also performed for tourists at resorts and hotels.



Vatulawa Trio plays *sere ni cumu* in the *trio* style on tracks 1–8. Dreketi village, Qamea island. 1986.

According to Cattermole, Fijian musicians currently distinguish two broad styles of *sere ni cumu*—*trio* and *sere bass*. This album includes songs in both styles. Tracks 1–8 and 18 are examples of *trio* style, while I would include tracks 9–17 in the older *sere bass* style. *Sere bass* has a prominent bass line as well

as the three solo parts of *sere trio*, and *tempi* are usually slower and the overall pitch lower than in *trio* style. *Trio* songs have a greater range of accompanying chords. (Cattermole 2006).

Sere ni cumu songs are traditionally sung by all-male groups, and male falsetto is commonly employed. This is mainly because men rather than women participate in the extended *yaqona*-drinking sessions. Some *sere ni cumu* village groups do contain a number of women, as in this album.

Texts

Texts are usually in the standard Fijian language, but some songs may have island dialect words or phrases, and others may contain words or verses in English. Texts are often in quatrain format with end rhyme (usually *aaaa*). Two or more verses may be combined with a refrain (*taletale*). Repetition of the last two lines of the last stanza of the song is a common practice. Many *sere ni cumu* song texts have love and human relationships or the beauties of nature and homeland as their primary subject matter, but other topics are also common, such as bereavement, politics, and football. The text and translation of the song “The Night Masquerader” (track 13) is given below as an example of *sere ni cumu*. (It includes an additional verse not sung in this recorded version.) Verses two and three are regular quatrains with typical end rhyme. The refrain (only a textual refrain in this case) has end rhyme, but both it and verse one have irregular line and stanza lengths. The subject of this poem is a Don Juan-type character on his death bed.

Ko Droka na Bogi

Verse 1:

Ko droka na bogi
Na yacana me'u tu'una
Ni sigalevu mai qai vau 'a uluna
Yakavi sobu mai
Qai mata bulabula
Ni baci 'uvura'a tu nai boi ni vauta

Refrain:

Ni mai tuburi au tu na veivutuni
Mai na i lo'olo'o na ibe 'ai tutuvi-oilei
Ni leqa lo a lomaqu qai tatavu'ivu'i
Adi dr'o'a na bogi 'ei
'Di Li'u drau-ni-vudi oilei

Verse 2:

Sega so ni yaga na va'aiulubale
Va'a rau tawase tu a rusa 'ei mate
Na mate ta'a levu lei o dabe tu ca'e
Ni drau sa moce au sa na lesu tale

Verse 3:

Vosa ni tatau tu a sui ni sare sare
Na noqu i loloma vei ira na tagane
Me ra 'alougata me'u nanumi mai ca'e
Dou sa moce au sa na lesu tale

The Night Masquerader

English translation by Meli Tuqota

Verse 1:

He thrives on revelry at night
But when new day dawns
He ties a band around his head
When night falls
He dresses in perfumes and powder
And blossoms with eager expectations

Refrain:

But now I regret my past life
Of pillows, mats, blankets, and late nights
It was unstable and troubled
As I pondered on the costumes of leaves
Which hid my true self

Verse 2:

It's useless to give excuses for my doings
Because I'm ready to depart
This sickness has truly conquered me
So I'm ready to go—Goodbye

Verse 3:

I'm only skin and bones as you can see
But please remember me to all my lovers
May they prosper, and remember me
Goodbye now, for my departure is at hand



The Vatulawa Trio (Iliesa Koroï, Ifireimi Wailaea, and Viliame Lekai) and Noa, Iliesa's elder brother and the lead guitarist. 1986.

Instrumental accompaniment

Songs may be sung a cappella or accompanied by slow and steady strumming on one or two acoustic guitars and a ukulele. The village group recorded on tracks 1–8 of this album, however, used three acoustic guitars, each with a designated function (lead, rhythm, and bass). This group also employed distinctive tunings for their instruments. As in Hawaiian slack-key guitar playing, their guitars and ukulele are tuned in special ways, developed over the years to best suit particular styles of playing. The village group recorded on track 18 used three electric guitars (lead, rhythm, and bass), as well as drum kit and tambourine. (See below in Track Notes).

Occasionally, songs are accompanied by instruments more commonly associated with the indigenous narrative chant/dance *meke* tradition of Fiji—slit drum (*lali*), stamping tubes (*derua*), and handclapping (tracks 9 and 17).

Melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic aspects

Song melodies are almost invariably set in Western major keys. Melodic form is predominantly strophic, with or without a distinct musical refrain. Meter is commonly 4/4 or 2/4, but 6/8 is also used (as on tracks 11, 13, 15, and 16). Song texts are usually set syllabically to the melody.



Playing the *lali* (slit drum). 1986.

The voices sing in three- or four-part harmony. Harmonic progressions generally follow Western models, with tonic, subdominant, and dominant harmonies predominating. Tonic and dominant sevenths, and tonic with added sixth are also common. Occasionally, supertonic major chords (V of V), and submediant minor chords (vi chords) are used. Modulation is rare. The vocal harmonies are typically closely spaced in Fijian *sere ni cumu* except for the bass part of songs in *sere bass* style, which tends to be not only spatially separated but also quite prominent dynamically. A prominent bass is an aesthetic much admired by Fijians and is commonly found in such *sere ni cumu* songs. Its importance is possibly related to that of the bass drone, which acts as the harmonic anchor in traditional *meke* singing (see the section below).

Links to older Fijian musical traditions

Although influenced by Western melodies and harmonies, *sere ni cumu* may exhibit other elements that link them to pre-European musical traditions in Fiji. Some songs have narrative texts which contain the poetic imagery and symbolism characteristic not only of the older *meke* tradition in Fiji, but of pre-European chants in many Pacific cultures. See, for example, the text of track 13, translated on page 10. Other features reminiscent of *meke* include triple subdivision of the basic beat, the employment of male falsetto in many songs, and the occasional use of traditional musical instruments such as the slit drum and stamping tubes to accompany the singing. Moreover, most village-style *sere ni cumu* are sung by a group of performers sitting in a tight circle, with the leaders in the middle. This performance format is typical also of *meke*. Group rather than solo performance practice is emphasized throughout most of Melanesia and Polynesia; similarly, polyphony (albeit in possibly Western-derived tertial style—based on the interval of a third) is the prevailing texture for group singing in traditional music of the area. This group performance ethos reflects the communal lifestyle of Fijian villagers.

Dance

Most traditional *sere ni cumu* are simply songs with or without instrumental accompaniment, and are not usually associated or performed with dance. The *taralala* is a notable exception. The *taralala* is a social dance performed on festive occasions to music similar in style to other *sere ni cumu*, but with a distinctive dance-like rhythm. It is usually danced by couples or groups of people in a line taking several steps forward and then backward. According to several sources, this dance was originally introduced by Methodist missionaries as a kindergarten activity (see track 17). Cattermole also mentions *tauratale* and *danisi* as informal dance types associated with the singing of *sere ni cumu* (2006).

Track Notes

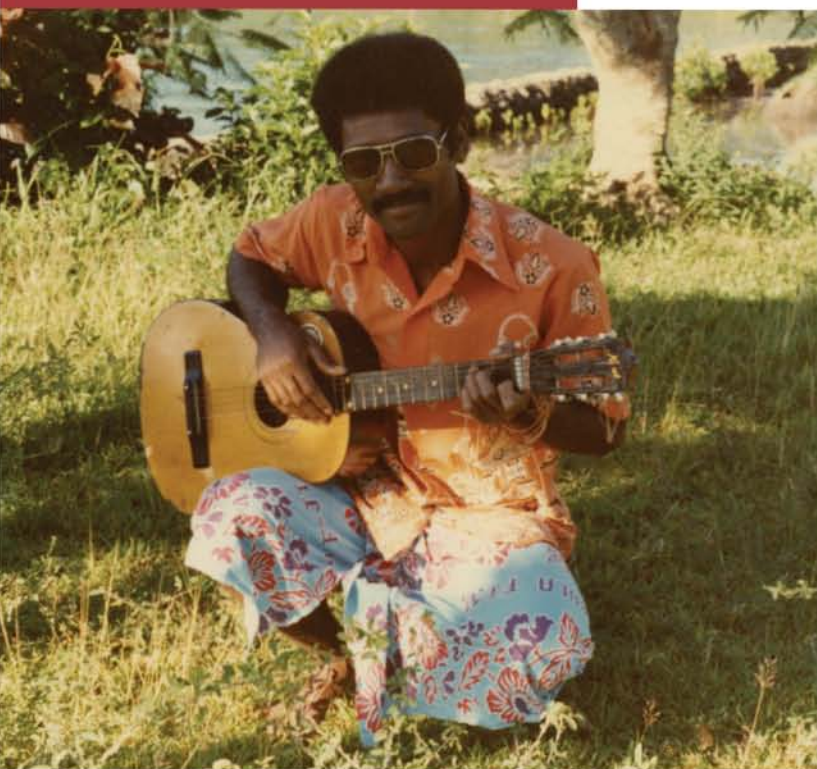
Iliesa Koroi composed the songs on tracks 1–8. Dreketi village, Qamea island. 1986.

In most cases, Fijian *sere ni cumu* are identified only by the first line or half line of the first stanza (or sometimes the refrain), rather than a distinct or independent title. Many songs do have specific composers who are mentioned below where known. Some songs are considered traditional—there is no known or remembered composer.

Singing groups do not always have a special designated name and are simply referred to by the village in these notes (e.g., “Baidamudamu village group”) in these notes.

Tracks 1–8

1. Kauti Au Ena Vakacegu (Lead me gently to my resting place)
2. Isa Lei Ko Iteni (Beautiful Eden)
3. Luvuci Au (I am touched with grief)
4. Lewe Kei na Sui (Flesh and bone)
5. Na Tagi na Rarawa (Your tears of sorrow)
6. Marama (Ladies)
7. Unaisi Kautoga
8. Au Mai Kidavaki (You welcome me)



The first eight tracks are songs performed by the Vatulawa Trio, all composed by Iliesa Koroi, who is also the lead singer (*laga*) of this *sere ni cumu* group. All eight songs are in the *trio* style of *sere ni cumu* described above. Recorded in Dreketi village (Qamea island), this group had four main members—the vocal trio: Iliesa Koroi, Ifireimi Wailaea, and Viliame Lekai, who also play guitars and a ukulele, and Noa (Iliesa's elder brother), the “lead” guitarist.



The Vatulawa Trio: Iliesa Koroi, Ifireimi Wailaea, and Viliame Lekai. Dreketi village, Qamea island. 1986.

The themes of the texts of Iliesa's songs range from love (tracks 1, 6, and 8) to love lost (tracks 4 and 7) to grief or bereavement (tracks 3 and 5). Track 2 has a Biblical theme—the fall of Adam from grace in the Garden of Eden.

All eight songs by this group are in the same major key and use simple duple time (mainly 4/4). Tempi vary

from slow (tracks 2 and 3) to medium (tracks 4, 5, and 7) to upbeat (tracks 1, 6, and 8). All eight songs are strophic and most have a distinct musical refrain. (Tracks 4 and 6 have no refrain.) This group features a smooth tonal blend. The three voices (high tenor or falsetto) sing in close triadic harmonies and often parallel harmony in rhythmic unison with no obvious leader or part differentiation. (Track 2, however, includes one stanza for vocal solo.)

The three guitars used are all standard acoustic guitars, but they function as “lead,” “rhythm,” or “bass” in the songs. The use of three guitars with such functional roles and designations is unusual in *sere ni cumu* village groups on Taveuni and Kadavu, and is based on the practice of electric Western and Fijian bands. The rhythm guitar had only the bottom five strings at the time of recording, while the bass had only the bottom three strings in place, and the ukulele had three strings instead of four. The three strings of the ukulele were tuned to form a major chord. The tuning of the three guitars generally followed the standard sequence of intervals, but not all guitars were tuned to the same pitches and were fingered or barred idiosyncratically. The rhythm guitarist and the ukulele strum chords, while the bass guitar picks out bass patterns. The left-handed lead guitarist, Noa, contributes melodic figures, sometimes in response to vocal phrases (in the manner of blues singing/guitar playing), and provides solos in the instrumental interludes, which are a feature of all tracks except 3 and 6. Elements adapted from jazz or Latin music may be heard in his playing. The instrumentalists use conventional melodic patterns to close most songs. Four songs end on a tonic-added-sixth chord.

Tracks 9–18

Tracks 9–18 are performances of *sere ni cumu* by village groups recorded in various locations on the islands of Taveuni and Kadavu. They demonstrate a variety of styles of a cappella and accompanied songs. Tracks 9–17 represent the older *sere bass* style of *sere ni cumu* described above. Track 18 is unusual for a village group in that all three guitars are electric—lead, rhythm, and bass—and the group includes drums and tambourine. Although within the *trio* category of *sere ni cumu*, the instrumentation is clearly based on a modern electric band.

9. Sa Rogo Levu na Noqu Vanua (My land was famous) is a song recorded in the village of Baidamudamu (Kadavu island), composed by Noa Waqavesi. The text, in a regular series of rhyming quatrains, concerns the 1982 election of a politician from this village, Mr. Akariva Nabati (who became Minister of Home Affairs). The song congratulates him, wishes him well, and beseeches him to remain faithful to those who elected him. The strophic melody (with no refrain) is accompanied by two instruments from the *meke* tradition—*lali* (slit drum) and *derua* (stamping tubes) as well as ukulele. The piece fades out at the end of the recording.

10. Ko Lomaloma (Lomaloma) is a very popular, older type of a cappella *sere ni cumu*, describing the natural beauties of Lomaloma harbor in the central Lau islands, from where this song is said to originate. This version was recorded in Vuna village (Taveuni island), sung by a mixed-gender group, with drone/bass prominence. Its 3/4 time is unusual.

11. Noqu Vanua (My island), recorded in Solovola village (Kadavu) and composed by Ravaele Rakabua, is a slow song in 6/8 time (MM = 56 beats per minute). Its regular quatrain text (rhyming *aaaa*) describes the beauty of the composer's island (Kadavu), mentioning several villages and inviting his

“beloved” to come and visit. Sung by an all-male group (with falsetto), the strophic song (with no refrain) is accompanied by guitar and ukulele strumming chords in a constant rhythmic pattern. A *ritardando* concludes the song.

12. Au Bau Via Talanoa (I want to tell a story) is an old Vanua Levu island song about love and marriage, recorded on a veranda in Naselesele village (Taveuni) during a kava-drinking session. Sung by an all-male group with prominent bass and some divided parts, the accompaniment consists of two guitars and a ukulele, strumming a constant rhythm in 6/8 time. It is a strophic song with refrain.

13. Ko Droka na Bogi (The night masquerader) is another a cappella piece in the older style, with a text rich in poetic symbolism, which describes a Don Juan-type character who regrets his past amorous exploits as he contemplates his impending death. Recorded in Dreketi village (Qamea), this slow song in 6/8 time (MM = 40 beats per minute) has the same I-IV-V chord progression as track 9. It lacks a distinct *musical* refrain. The song text and translation are given on pages 9–10.

14. Au na Viriya (I will build), recorded in Somosomo (Taveuni) and composed by Ilai Kuli, concerns the provision of land rights and title by the chiefs. The regular quatrain text (aaaa) is set syllabically to the repeated rhythm of the vocal part. Guitar and ukulele provide a constant chordal strum (with added sixth). Note the extended harmonies (I and V only), the prominent bass, and the male falsetto part. Strophic with no refrain.

15. Ni Rogoca Mada na Noqu i Talanoa (Please hear my story) is a song about playing football from Baidamudamu (Kadavu). It includes the English words “never say die.” Composed by a villager named Maikali Qalomaiwasa in 1955, this song features slow 6/8 time (MM = 48 beats per minute) with a strongly pronounced (and accented) bass line. The only accompaniment is incidental tapping and thumping on the floor by the singers. Strophic with no refrain.

16. Turaga ni Nanumi Viti (Lord remember Fiji) is a patriotic song about Fiji composed before independence by Silio Cola. This version was recorded in the village of Navakawau (Taveuni) sung by an all-male group and accompanied by guitar and ukulele. It has an unusual sectional structure for a *sere ni cumu* song. The first section in a slow 6/8 (MM = 72 beats per minute) is followed by a contrasting section with handclapping in a faster 2/4 time (MM = 108 beats per minute). The third section maintains the faster tempo and clapping but features responsorial singing between two groups.

17. Ke Ko Dovu (If you were sugarcane) is a love song, which is used to accompany the *taralala* dance. It was recorded in Waica village (Taveuni). Accompanied by *lali* and clapping, its musical style is reminiscent of traditional *meke* singing with clear solo (*laga*) and chorus part differentiation, prominent drone harmony, and extended tonal repetition. Strophic with no refrain.

18. Talanoa ni Noqu Koro (Story of my village) is a song by an electric band from the village Vuna (Taveuni). It features three young male singers with close-spaced three-part harmony in rhythmic unison. Two guitars, bass, drums, and tambourine.

Notes on Recording

A Sony TC-510-2 stereo reel-to-reel tape recorder with two dynamic microphones (cardioid and omnidirectional) were used to make the original field recordings (at 7.5 rpm). Because they are “field” recordings, occasionally extraneous “on-site” sounds may be heard. A cock crows at the end of track 4, for example, and tracks 1–8 feature a “sniff” in places because the lead guitarist had a bad cold at the time!

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Dr. David Goldsworthy is an ethnomusicologist affiliated with The University of New England, Armidale, Australia, with special research interests, expertise, and publications in the fields of Indonesian music and traditional and contemporary music of the Pacific (especially that of Fiji, Hawaii, the Cook Islands, and New Caledonia). His interest in Fijian music

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Mr. Meli Tuqota is a Fijian music educator and choir conductor. Mr. Tuqota has taught music in various Fijian institutions, including Fulton College, Avondale College, Suva Grammar, Nasino Teacher's College, and the Fiji Institute of Technology.

Credits

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Recorded and mixed by David Goldsworthy and Meli Tuqota, January and February 1986.

Annotated by David Goldsworthy

Photos by David Goldsworthy and Meli Tuqota

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