

Colonialism and Relative Preferences for (In)Equality: How Indigenous and Displaced Populations Reason About Rights and Democratic Governance in Post-Colonial Fiji

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This work was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation to JG (SES-1949467).

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Ethical Approval Statement

This study received ethical approval from The New School Institutional Review Board (IRB) on July 22, 2022 (Reference Number: #2020-51).

Patient Consent Statement

This study did not involve individuals under the age to consent; therefore, parental or guardian consent was not required. Adult participants were read the consent form, and verbal consent was obtained before the research began.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest concerning the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgments

This research was made possible by Fiji's Ministry of Education, Heritage, and Arts; Ministry of iTaukei Affairs; and dedicated research assistants: Ua Kaisau, Niumai Sovinilawe, Emi Gavidi, Apenisa Vatugata, Inise Sura, Alesi Gata, Naqiri Israel, Ranjana Kumar, Reshmi Wati, Rita Chand, Latchmaiya Naidu, and Renuka Naidu.

Author Contributions

AL, SH, MHP, and JG developed the idea for the research, ran the focus groups relevant to the current study, and designed the research, with critical contributions from ARMI, RW, and other local research assistants. AL, SH, MHP, RW, and ARMI led fieldwork with support from JG. JYK, SH, MHP led data analysis. AL and SH wrote the first draft of the manuscript with support from MHP and JYK on results. All authors provided critical edits. This paper is dedicated to Ranjana Kumar, may her memory be a blessing.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation to JG (SES-1949467).

Abstract

To what extent are preferences for individual versus collective rights shaped by historical experiences, particularly colonialism? To answer this question, we conducted field studies in Fiji, a former British colony, home to two populations with distinct histories of colonial subjugation. We reasoned that for indigenous iTaukei, for whom collective rights were stripped, prioritizing group rights on issues tied to colonial harm would be seen as essential for cultural survival. Contrastingly, we reasoned that Indo-Fijians (descendants of indentured laborers brought to Fiji under colonial rule) would prefer equal rights for all. In Study 1, we assessed attitudes toward equality across various social and political issues, finding that iTaukei were less likely to endorse equality, particularly concerning land ownership. Study 2 explored iTaukei perceptions of land rights, revealing that they view granting Indo-Fijians land access as a threat to their identity and survival. Study 3 explored support for democratic norms, themselves an artifact of Western legal thinking imposed upon Fiji. While support for democratic norms was high in abstract, members of both groups were more supportive of democratic violations when such violations served their group's interests. Findings highlight the lasting psychological impact of colonialism, demonstrating how historical grievances shape reasoning about rights and governance in post-colonial societies. Understanding these dynamics provides insight into contemporary intergroup conflict and the tension between universal democratic principles and indigenous collective rights. This work contributes to broader discussions on decolonization and underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches to human rights discourse.

Colonialism and Relative Preferences for (In)Equality: How Indigenous and Displaced Populations Reason About Rights and Democratic Governance in Post-Colonial Fiji

In contemporary social research, there is a growing awareness of the need to venture beyond sampling Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) populations (Henrich et al., 2010; Rad et al., 2018). However, the persistence of imposing Western conceptual frameworks on diverse global settings remains a critical issue (Medin, Bennis & Chandler, 2010). This paper aims to critically discuss how the prioritization given to equal individual rights in Western discourse fails to acknowledge that societal values and moral judgments are not universal, but rather highly context-dependent. While in the Global North individual rights are typically seen as sacrosanct, the balance of individual rights and collective rights is often more complex.

Perspectives on the balance between collective and individual rights are influenced by the broader geopolitical landscape. Our focus in this paper is on how such perspectives may have been shaped by distinct experiences with settler-colonialism faced by indigenous and displaced populations in Fiji. As is true for the indigenous rights movement in general, *iTaukei* (the indigenous population of Fiji) view the prioritization of collective rights as vital to redressing wrongs of settler-colonialism and the survival of indigenous identity (Buchanan, 1993). Yet, *Indo-Fijians* (Fijians of Indian heritage, most of whom are descendants of indentured servants displaced from India during British rule) view the prioritization of individual rights over collective rights as vital to the flourishing of their community. Understanding these dynamics is crucial in societies where such groups share a social and political space, as underlying tensions and conflicting needs can shape intergroup relations and, ultimately, affect political stability by influencing commitment to democratic norms.

Fiji presents an exemplary case study. Its past is not merely a narrative of conflict between settler colonialists and indigenous populations; it also formed the basis of post-colonial conflict in Fiji between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians. In this paper, we investigate how the unique experiences of settler colonialism shaped the identities and values of these two groups (Davies, 2005; Ratuva, 2015) and led to conflicts between them over individual and collective rights, both by creating new tensions and reinforcing existing ones (Premdas & Steeves, 1993).

Both iTaukei and Indo-Fijians were harmed by settler colonialism. Settler colonialism exploited iTaukei land for profit, used Indo-Fijians as indentured servants for colonial companies, and reinforced ethnic and religious boundaries between these groups (Kaplan & Kelly, 1994; Kelly, 1995; Kelly & Kaplan, 2001). In this way, settler colonialism set the terms of the current conflict (for a historical overview, see Lal, 1992). We suggest that the specific ways in which each group experienced settler colonialism may have shaped their preferences and the conflict between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians (Davies, 2005; Ratuva, 2015).

iTaukei, as is common within indigenous rights movements, focus on protecting their collective rights as a means of redressing the harms of settler colonialism, preserving traditional systems of land regulation, and safeguarding their culture, whose identity and survival may depend on these rights (Buchanan, 1993). As we will demonstrate, this does not mean they disregard individual rights, but rather that they prioritize collective rights in specific domains, particularly those subjugated by colonial settlers.

Indo-Fijians, as a displaced population that has historically had to fight for its rights—against economic exploitation, for suffrage, and for recognition as equal citizens—often view the prioritization of indigenous collective rights as a threat to equality and their ability to lead a prosperous and free life in Fiji (Premdas & Steeves, 1993).

Colonial Legacies and Reasoning About Rights

Moral reasoning about rights can take different forms depending on historical experiences (Shweder, 1982; Newman, 2004; Vishkin & Ginges, 2022). Reasoning through the lens of “individual rights” emphasizes equal rights for each person and reflects a commitment to universal equality. This perspective is often seen as foundational in WEIRD contexts, where equal access and individual rights are considered necessary for a functioning democratic society (Trilling, 1973). A commitment to individual rights, as exemplified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, protects individuals from oppressive governments. In contrast, “collective rights” focus on protecting the rights of vulnerable groups, particularly indigenous peoples. The collective rights of indigenous groups are recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Gilbert, 2007) and are seen as a challenge to settler regimes founded on Western notions of individual property rights. For such groups, prioritizing individual rights to equality can be seen as a threat to their survival or cultural identity (Miller, 1997; Newman, 2004). The balance between these rights can be difficult to set. However, discourse on individual human rights is sometimes used as a tool of repression that reinforces power structures (Brown, 2006), whereas a focus on group rights could create its own oppressive power structures if the group concerned is sufficiently powerful.

Conflicts between individual and collective rights often developed in the context of settler colonialism. For example, the colonization of Ghana and South Africa by the British and Dutch completely altered the African identity of these nations, changing their connection with their culture, land, and language (Sangmor, 2013). As we shall see for both communities we are concerned with in Fiji, settler colonialism often disrupted the nature of identity and tradition, altering connections to culture, land, and language. However, different experiences of settler colonialism for these two groups influenced the current conflict over certain rights. Indigenous

groups often focus on collective rights to redress wrongs of settler colonialism and protect their rights (Jacob et al., 2020). Those who were displaced under settler colonialism (e.g., enslaved peoples), however, often focus on individual rights, trying to achieve equality under the law and working to eliminate discriminatory structures that perpetuate inequities.

The Case of Fiji

In 1874, Fiji was formally transferred to the British Crown through the Deed of Cession signed by key iTaukei chiefs and Cakobau, the self-declared king of Fiji. This followed a period of exploitation of the iTaukei by White settlers who had begun purchasing land and founding plantations in the 1840s, developing cotton and sugarcane industries. Britain colonized Fiji motivated by the need to stabilize its economic exploitation by colonial companies, as well by Fiji's geopolitical value for trade routes (D'Souza, 2000; Rokolekutu, 2024).

The British codified what they saw as “traditional” land use and ownership practices to exert control over Fiji and develop a balance between the interests of iTaukei and settlers. However, these laws distorted what was a more flexible set of practices prior to colonial rule (France, 1969). Prior to British rule, iTaukei chiefs controlled the land and were able to gift the use of land through marriage or for “favor.” However, before colonial rule, the right to use land could be temporarily alienated, but not the land itself. Settlers and iTaukei had different conceptual understandings of what a land sale meant. Plantation owners, viewing their land as freehold and private, barred iTaukei from their plantations, which, alongside the fact that many deals were fraudulent and disputed, contributed to waves of violent conflict between iTaukei and settlers (Ward, 1995).

The solution of the British was to recognize land claimed by settlers as freehold land and “grant” the remaining 87% of Fiji to its Indigenous population, divided into mataqali (clans).

iTaukei were forbidden to sell their land and were restricted from entering into the economic market, creating their own companies, or signing commercial contracts. They could earn income primarily by leasing their land. However, this process was created and controlled by the colonial government, which restricted the rights of each clan over their own land and codified non-traditional and exploitative practices. Clans would receive only a small proportion of the rent, leases were fixed for long terms (30–99 years), and land was exploited for often vast profits not shared with the indigenous owners (Ward, 1995).

To provide a workforce for plantations, the British imported indentured servants from India. Following the abolition of indentured labor (achieved primarily by Indian activism), Indo-Fijians took over production of the sugarcane industry on leased land (Carens, 1992). iTaukei likely always saw land as sacred and essential to collective existence. Indeed, the word for land, vanua, also refers to “people in a particular territory under a chief” (Tuwere, 1992). They viewed their land as more than as a resource, but as a sacred inheritance that connects iTaukei to their past, present, and future (Davies, 2005). However, the ways in which rights to land create conflict today, may have been facilitated by conflict created by British rule which exacerbated pre-existing iTaukei concerns about losing their land (Tomlinson, 2002). The problems inherent in the land tenure system created by the British persisted after Fiji gained independence in 1970. The system the British developed resulted in insecurity for Indo-Fijians who overwhelmingly rely on land leases. When these leases are not renewed, they face loss of both income and home ownership (Lally, 2017). In turn, it led to land dependency for iTaukei, who are overwhelmingly at the bottom of Fiji’s socio-economic scale (Rokolekutu, 2007).

In addition to creating conflict over land, British colonial authorities reified community boundaries to exercise control. Throughout its rule, Britain sought to ensure the loyalty of the

population and stability of interests between different groups in numerous ways. They punished signs of disaffection for British rule and encouraged iTaukei affection by altering the relationships between the chiefs and its people. Instead of chiefs being appointed by the people who they ruled, as was often traditional practice, Britain appointed the chiefs who were used to encourage loyalty to the Crown. The British also sought to make sure boundaries between Indo-Fijians and iTaukei were impermeable so as not to confuse the balance they sought between the rights and restrictions both communities faced. For example, attempts by individual Indo-Fijians to be accepted as iTaukei were blocked by the British even though welcomed by the relevant iTaukei communities, and the British attempted to restrict the ability of iTaukei to convert to Hinduism (Kaplan & Kelly, 1994).

One way the British reified communal cleavages was by developing the communal roll system of voting rights. The British colonial authorities established the Legislative Council in 1904 where voting was restricted to a small number of white settler landowners. In 1929, following a campaign by the Indo-Fijian community for representation, some Indo-Fijians were granted voting rights, though these were limited by property, education and income qualifications. Indo-Fijians were allowed to elect three representatives, European settlers elected six representatives, while iTaukei had no direct representation. Over time, restrictions on voting rights for both communities were lifted, yet representation was restricted by the communal roll system in a way that did not reflect demographic realities. At first this system was used to privilege the White minority, later to balance electoral power of both communities. The community roll system likely entrenched group boundaries, blocking the two communities from negotiating and advancing common interests, and instead encouraging identity politics.

The path to Fijian independence in 1970 involved extensive constitutional negotiations between the communities and the British Government. Although the first indentured servants arrived from India in 1879, by 1956 Indo-Fijians constituted most of the population. Indo-Fijians campaigned for universal suffrage and individual rights, while iTaukei seeking to protect their collective indigenous rights campaigned for the continuation of the electoral roll system (Firth, 2017). The priorities both communities gave to these different forms of rights reflected their interests. Universal suffrage would help Indo-Fijians protect and promote their rights as a majority, while the communal roll system would help indigenous Fijians, now a minority in their own land, protect their rights, and particularly their land rights.

Intergroup conflict over land and democratic rights post colonialism

The inter-communal inequities and conflicts created during colonial rule persisted post-independence. The iTaukei controlled the military and by virtue of the communal roll system had political power that was disproportionate to their numbers. Inter-communal conflict became violent in 1987 when the iTaukei carried out the first of a series of military coups in response to the election of a government led by an Indo-Fijian Prime Minister (Lal, 2021). These coups, orchestrated by Christian iTaukei leaders, highlight the continued relevance of the conflict between individual and collective rights in Fiji. The violent nature of the coups, and the instability that they created for Indo-Fijians, led many Indo-Fijians to emigrate (Voigt-Graf, 2008). The communal role electoral system was abolished in 2013 in favor of universal suffrage. By then Indo-Fijians were no longer a majority. Indo-Fijians are now 34% and iTaukei 51% of the population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The land tenure system codified by the British continued to create conflict, with both communities feeling exploited. Although legal restrictions on iTaukei economic life did not

persist post-independence, the pattern created under colonial rule persisted with iTaukei dependent on often exploitative lease arrangements, and Indo-Fijians continuing to dominate economic life. This is reflected in the relative poverty rates which are generally high in Fiji: 36.2% for iTaukei and 19.8% for Indo-Fijians. Almost 9% of iTaukei households, and 3% of Indo-Fijian households experience food poverty (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The Present Research

We report three field studies that investigate how iTaukei and Indo-Fijians reason about the balance between collective and individual rights. Psychological studies often make broad generalizations about the distribution of beliefs or norms across groups, resulting in distinctions between different types of cultures, such as independent versus interdependent, collectivist versus individualistic, or tight versus loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2011; Triandis & Gelfand, 2012). Important work has also linked these broad tendencies to environmental factors (Uchida et al., 2020). For example, research has shown that people in regions of China where rice farming is dominant tend to have a more collectivist orientation, whereas those in areas where wheat farming is dominant tend to be more individualistic (Talhelm et al., 2014).

While these broad characterizations can be useful, they may also reinforce cultural stereotypes that overlook how differences are context-dependent and evolve over time. In Fiji, for example, iTaukei are often stereotyped as more communally oriented than Indo-Fijians. However, we investigated whether differences in the emphasis on collective versus individual rights are specific to conflicts stemming from settler colonialism. This informed Study 1, which examined the scope of communal differences in prioritizing collective versus individual rights. Here, we asked iTaukei and Indo-Fijian participants whether certain rights should be allocated preferentially to one community or another, or equally regardless of identity. We predicted that

Indo-Fijians would generally favor equality, whereas iTaukei would prioritize collective rights in domains most closely tied to their historical experience with settler colonialism, such as land, but would favor equality for rights not associated with settler colonialism.

In Study 2, we investigated how iTaukei reason about land rights to better understand the preference we predicted for collective land rights. We used the framework of sacred values, which suggests that communities sacralize things they believe are essential to their group identity (Ginges & Atran, 2014; Tetlock, 2003).

In Study 3, we conducted a deeper investigation into a critical issue for both groups: democratic rights. Here, we explored whether differences in the commitment of these two groups to universal suffrage—a key goal of Indo-Fijians since independence—reflected a broader commitment to individual rights or whether adherence to democratic norms is primarily strategic, serving to protect key group interests.

Together, these studies demonstrate how colonialism shapes the ways different groups reason about individual and collective rights and influences subsequent intergroup conflicts. This work also challenges the assumption that individual rights should necessarily take precedence over group rights—a perspective rooted in colonial ideology that, for indigenous communities, may be perceived as a continuation of colonial harm.

Importantly, these insights are not unique to the Fijian context. They have broader implications for understanding the experiences, needs, and values of other colonized populations, whether indigenous or displaced. Given the collaborative nature of this research—featuring partnerships between researchers from the Global North, iTaukei, and Indo-Fijians—we conclude with a critical self-reflection on how our methods and findings may unintentionally

echo colonial practices. By engaging in this reflection, we hope to contribute to ongoing discussions on decolonizing scientific research.

Before describing the methods for each study, we first provide an overview of the demographics and outline our general approach to fieldwork and key methodological decisions. This includes details on participant recruitment, the use of focus groups to inform our study design, the rationale behind selecting specific data collection sites, and a description of how data was collected in these locations.

Cross-Study Methods

Data for all three studies were collected via field interviews with the same participants as part of a large field study. Thus, we report the cross-study methodology and then provide more specific details on diverging methods within each study. All three studies were conducted with 325 Christian iTaukei ($M_{age} = 44.86$, $SD_{age} = 16.83$; 47% Male, 53% Female). Additionally, Study 1 and Study 3 (but not Study 2) included 294 Hindu-Indo Fijians ($M_{age} = 47.22$, $SD_{age} = 16.02$; 42% Male, 58% Female).¹

Approval to conduct this research was granted by Fiji's Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts and the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs. We also gained permission from and partnered with the Nadroga-Navosa Provincial Council (a local branch of the Ministry for iTaukei Affairs), which facilitated community connections. We partnered with local research assistants from each ethnoreligious group. These were five Indo-Fijians and nine iTaukei (three of whom participated in focus groups but not interviews). All research assistants were paid for their time.

¹ After excluding six participants due to interviewer error (n = 2) or because the interview was unusually rushed (n = 4)

After gaining permission and assembling research teams, we engaged in a two-week long focus group process. To do so, we organized separate focus groups for each ethnoreligious team—one for iTaukei and one for Indo-Fijians—which were held in different locations to give each team the autonomy and comfort to express themselves freely. Focus groups were led by two non-Fijian members of our research team. Through this shared work, we developed materials, designed experimental procedures, and (back) translated measures. Focus groups allowed our non-Fijian team members to: (a) gather feedback on our preliminary ideas, including an assessment of their cultural resonance and appropriateness; (b) refine and integrate suggestions from research assistants for our survey content; and (c) enhance our cultural understanding and contextual knowledge of the environment we were working in. For instance, we were interested in understanding Fijian perspectives on specific rights, such as the right to education or political office. But it was through local research assistants that we came to fully understand the significance of certain rights within their community, like the right to own land for iTaukei.

Our focus group interactions also made clear that not all questions could be asked equally in both communities. As an illustration, the reverence for land is deeply embedded in iTaukei culture and cannot be compared directly to how Indo-Fijians engage with it and think about it. In contrast, when exploring topics like democratic commitment, we realized that while viewpoints varied, the concept was relatable across both groups and would likely reveal meaningful differences in how both groups think. Throughout our field research, while we openly discussed how our research could be adapted to the local context, our research assistants remained unaware of our specific hypotheses.

After finalizing the survey content in English, we translated and back translated study materials before programming materials into Qualtrics. Research assistants were trained in how

to conduct field interviews using Qualtrics Offline on mobile tablets. They then conducted house-to-house interviews in participants' native language.

Our sampling strategy was informed by prior work (Pasek et al., 2020, 2023). We worked with the Nadroga-Navosa Provincial Council to identify and recruit Christian iTaukei participants. Specifically, the Provincial Council organized a *Sevu Sevu* ceremony, a traditional meeting during which we requested permission from village leaders to conduct research in their communities. Village chiefs informed community members about our presence. Because the same organized structure does not exist for Hindu-Indo Fijians, we instead worked with Hindu-Indo-Fijian research assistants to identify communities that, like iTaukei communities we sampled, varied in size, urbaneness/ruralness, and intergroup contact. Indo-Fijian research assistants used common markings (i.e., red flags on houses and shrines) and word of mouth to identify Hindu-Indo Fijian participants.

All participants confirmed their religion before we commenced interviews. Interviews were conducted in quiet, private spaces to guarantee that participants could freely respond without their answers being influenced by others. This also allowed us to interview more than one person in a single household, sometimes simultaneously (with different research assistants) and sometimes sequentially. There were some rare instances in which participants were caretaking. In these cases, interviewers allowed for the presence of another (usually children).

Research assistants provided detailed accounts of our research, sponsors, and goals before being asked to verbally consent. No identifying information was collected from participants. Participants were asked not to discuss the details of the interview with others to ensure that others in their community were not unduly influenced. All participants were paid.

Study 1: How iTaukei and Indo-Fijians Reason About the Provision of Rights

The aim of Study 1 was to gauge how iTaukei and Indo-Fijians felt about equality, or granting individual rights to all people regardless of their identity, on various social and political issues in Fiji. Using issues directly taken from focus groups, we sought to have participants deliberate on the issues most important to people living in Fiji. Issues covered a wide range of topics that were directly tied to Fiji's colonial past (e.g., land ownership) or unrelated to it (e.g., receiving medical care). This allowed us to explore whether any differential reasoning may be a by-product of Fiji's colonized past.

We hypothesized that the iTaukei would favor inequality on issues symbolically tied to colonialism, endorsing preferences that privilege their group (i.e., privilege collective rights). The reason is that during the colonial era in Fiji, such issues were framed by colonizers as requiring protection after Indo-Fijians were brought to Fiji. In contrast, we predicted that Indo-Fijians would favor equality across issues, regardless of their connection to colonialism (i.e., favor individual rights). Since their arrival as indentured servants, Indo-Fijians have had to fight for representation, and promoting equality aligns with their goal of being recognized as equals and granted equal representation alongside the iTaukei.

Method

Participants answered questions about six issues, which were presented in a randomized order. These were the rights to: have your vote counted, own land, be elected Prime Minister of Fiji, freely practice religion, receive medical care, and be called Fijian (see Table 1). Rights we deemed symbolically connected to colonization included the rights to own land, be Prime Minister of Fiji, and be called Fijian (a term that is synonymous with iTaukei in native language). For each right, we asked whether the specific right in question should be granted

equally (individual rights for all citizens) or whether it should instead be differentially granted to one group over another (and if so, to iTaukei or Indo-Fijians).

Table 1

Study 1: Question Phrasing for Each of the Six Issues

Issues	Question Phrasing (If you could decide, would you...)
The right to have one's vote counted	Count every iTaukei vote as two votes, count every Indo-Fijian vote as two votes, or count iTaukei and Indo-Fijian votes equally?
The right to become Prime Minister	Grant the right to be elected Prime Minister more strongly to iTaukei, more strongly to Indo-Fijians, or would you grant it equally to both
The right to freely practice religion	Grant the right to practice one's religion more strongly to Christians, more strongly to Hindus, or would you grant it equally to both
The right to own land	Grant the right to own land more strongly to iTaukei, more strongly to Indo-Fijians, or would you grant it equally to both?
The right to receive medical care	Grant the right to receive medical treatment at a hospital more strongly to iTaukei, more strongly to Indo-Fijians, or would you grant it equally to both
The right to be called Fijian	Grant the right to be called Fijian more strongly to the iTaukei, more strongly to Indo-Fijians, or equally to both

Note. For all issues, the response options are “More strongly to iTaukei”, “equal”, “more strongly to Indo-Fijians” besides for the voting options, which were “Count every iTaukei vote as two votes”, “equally”, or “count every Indo-Fijian vote as two votes”.

Results

Consistent with our hypotheses, Fisher's exact tests revealed that iTaukei were less likely to favor equality than Indo-Fijians on all issues ($p < .001$) except for the right to receive medical

care, for which both groups largely favored equality (Table 2).² The difference between groups was especially pronounced regarding the right to own land, an issue most closely tied to colonial harm, where more than two-thirds of iTaukei participants indicated they would grant the right more strongly to iTaukei. In contrast, Indo-Fijian participants overwhelmingly favored equality across all issues and never indicated that they would grant more rights to themselves.³

² We used Fisher's exact tests instead of chi-square tests due to some cell counts falling below 5 (Fisher, 1934), because Indo-Fijians rarely favored granting more rights to one group over another.

³ See Supplemental Materials for additional analyses exploring interactions between group differences and issue (S1.1 and Table S1) and pairwise comparisons between groups within each issue (S1.2 and Table S2). See S1.2 and Table S3 for ancillary analyses exploring the percentage of each group held equality as a sacred value.

Table 2

Study 1: Proportions of iTaukei and Indo-Fijians Choosing Equality on Each Issue

Issue	% favoring equality		% favoring more rights for ingroup		Fisher's Exact Test (favoring equality ~ group membership)	
	iTaukei	Indo-Fijian	iTaukei	Indo-Fijian	p	p adjusted (Bonferroni)
Voting	82	99	18	0	< .001	< .001
Land	31	91	69	0	< .001	< .001
Prime Minister	65	84	35	0	< .001	< .001
Religion	64	95	36	0	< .001	< .001
Medical Care	98	99	2	0	.228	> .999
Fijian	53	93	47	0	< .001	< .001

Discussion

Results suggest that iTaukei and Indo-Fijians have developed distinct ways to reason about these rights. One interpretation of these results is that iTaukei participants have formed a more protective outlook, likely shaped by colonial pressures that heightened the salience of protecting indigenous land from perceived Indo-Fijian encroachment. This perspective also extends to their beliefs about representation in the Fijian government and the right to be called Fijian, which are similarly viewed as integral to preserving iTaukei identity. In contrast, we suspect that Indo-Fijians primarily reasoned about these rights through the lens of achieving equal status as Fijians, reflecting their historical struggle for representation and inclusion.

A critical finding from Study 1 is that the majority of iTaukei opposed the equal provision of land rights. This is not surprising given the centrality of land to iTaukei peoplehood and iTaukei identity, the fact that colonialism represented a direct theft of indigenous land, and the fact that many violent coups in Fiji have been waged over land rights and fear of British encroachment of land (Knapman, 1980; Ratuva, 2011). Given this finding, we wanted to better

understand how iTaukei reason about land, and what iTaukei think might happen if their exclusive control of land—which itself is enshrined into Fijian law—was jeopardized.

Study 2: How iTaukei Reason About Land Rights

In Study 2, we experimentally tested what outcomes iTaukei perceive would materialize if Indo-Fijians were granted access to land typically viewed as exclusive to iTaukei communities. We focus on land rights in this study because the confiscation of land was a core harm inflicted upon iTaukei due to colonialism, and because Study 1 demonstrated land to be the issue for which iTaukei most preferred exclusive rights for their ingroup. We hypothesized that iTaukei anticipate a wide range of harmful outcomes if land rights were granted equally to Indo-Fijians. Specifically, we expected iTaukei to perceive selling land as undermining their group's long-term strength, cultural identity, and even existence. We further hypothesized that approval or disapproval of selling would be shaped not only by personal and religious beliefs but also by the anticipated short- and long-term consequences for the iTaukei community. Finally, we expected reactions to selling land to include emotional responses, with anger playing a distinct role from general disapproval.

Method

Procedure & Materials

ITaukei participants ($N = 317$)⁴ were asked to imagine the following:

A Christian iTaukei village owns a large plot of iTaukei land. They know that their land is very valuable. Imagine that a law has been passed allowing each iTaukei village to lease or even to sell their land without asking permission. A wealthy group of Indo-Fijians have a plan to offer individual villages all over Fiji very large sums of money to buy their land. Unlike a lease, which promises a smaller amount of money, by selling the land the iTaukei village will be financially secure forever.

⁴ After excluding 8 participants who did not provide responses for this study

As part of the deal, they will build large factories or hotels that will employ many people from the village and help to build a modern medical clinic that will serve local iTaukei. If many villages choose to take these deals and sell their land, there will be much less native land in Fiji, but the iTaukei community will make a lot of money for their children and their children's children.

After reading the above scenario, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the “*sell*” condition ($n = 153$), they were told that many villages were offered this deal and most decided to sell the land. In the “*refuse to sell*” condition ($n = 164$), participants were told that many villages were offered this deal and most of the villages refused to sell the land. Participants were all presented with the dependent variables described hereafter.

Participants were asked to indicate whether the villagers could **truly be considered** iTaukei after their decision to sell/refuse to sell the land (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *not really*, 3 = *mostly*, 4 = *definitely*). To better understand **short-term anticipated consequences** for their community, we told (and asked): “The choices people make can have outcomes for now and the future. Right after the deal, do you think the decision to sell the land will make the iTaukei community much stronger, a little bit stronger, much weaker or a little bit weaker?” To better understand **long-term anticipated consequences** for their community, we asked: “In the long term, do you think the decision for most villages to sell the land will make the iTaukei community much stronger, a little bit stronger, much weaker, or a little bit weaker?” Response options for both short- and long-term anticipated outcomes were: 1 = *much weaker*, 2 = *a little bit weaker*, 3 = *a little bit stronger*, and 4 = *much stronger*. To assess **group preservation beliefs**, participants were asked: “If more iTaukei villages were to make the same decision to sell their land, do you think iTaukei life as you know it will continue to exist in 200 years?” Response options were 1 = *definitely not*, 2 = *probably not*, 3 = *probably*, and 4 = *definitely*.

In addition, participants indicated their **personal approval** of the decision (1 = *strongly disapprove*, 2 = *disapprove a little bit*, 3 = *approve a little bit*, and 4 = *strongly approve*). We also measured perception of **God's approval**⁵—the extent to which God would reward or punish the villagers for their decision (1 = *punish strongly*, 2 = *punish a little bit*, 3 = *reward a little bit*, 4 = *reward strongly*). Finally, we measured emotional reactions to the decision: **happiness** (1 = *not happy*, 2 = *a little bit happy*, 3 = *very happy*) and **anger** (1 = *not angry*, 2 = *a little bit angry*, 3 = *very angry*). Anger was reverse-coded, so that higher scores reflect a more positive emotional reaction to the decision (i.e. less anger).

To facilitate comparability across items with differing original scales (i.e., 1–4 or 1–3), we linearly transformed all dependent variables to a 0–1 scale. This was achieved by subtracting the minimum observed value and dividing by the range of the scale. This transformation preserved the relative spacing between values while placing all outcomes on a common metric, allowing for more direct comparison of effects across measures.

Results

Because the dependent variables were non-normally distributed (see Figure 1), we used Wilcoxon Rank Sum tests to compare responses across the two conditions. Across all dependent variables, participants in the *sell* condition evaluated the village's decision significantly more negatively than those in the *refuse to sell* condition (all $Ws > 6427$, all $ps < .001$; see Table 3 for the full set of results). Specifically, participants in the *sell* condition were less likely to grant iTaukei identity to the villagers, anticipated more negative consequences for the community in

⁵ Participants were first asked whether God would reward or punish the villagers for their decision (“reward”, “punish”, “I don’t know”). If they answered “reward” or “punish”, they were then asked about the strength of the reward/punishment. However, many participants chose “I don’t know” (n = 148), leading to substantial missing data for this item.

both the short and long term, and were less confident that the group would continue to exist 200 years from now. They were also less likely to personally approve of the decision, more likely to believe that God would punish the villagers, and less likely to feel positive emotions in response to the decision.

Figure 1

Study 2: Distribution of Dependent Variables in Each Condition

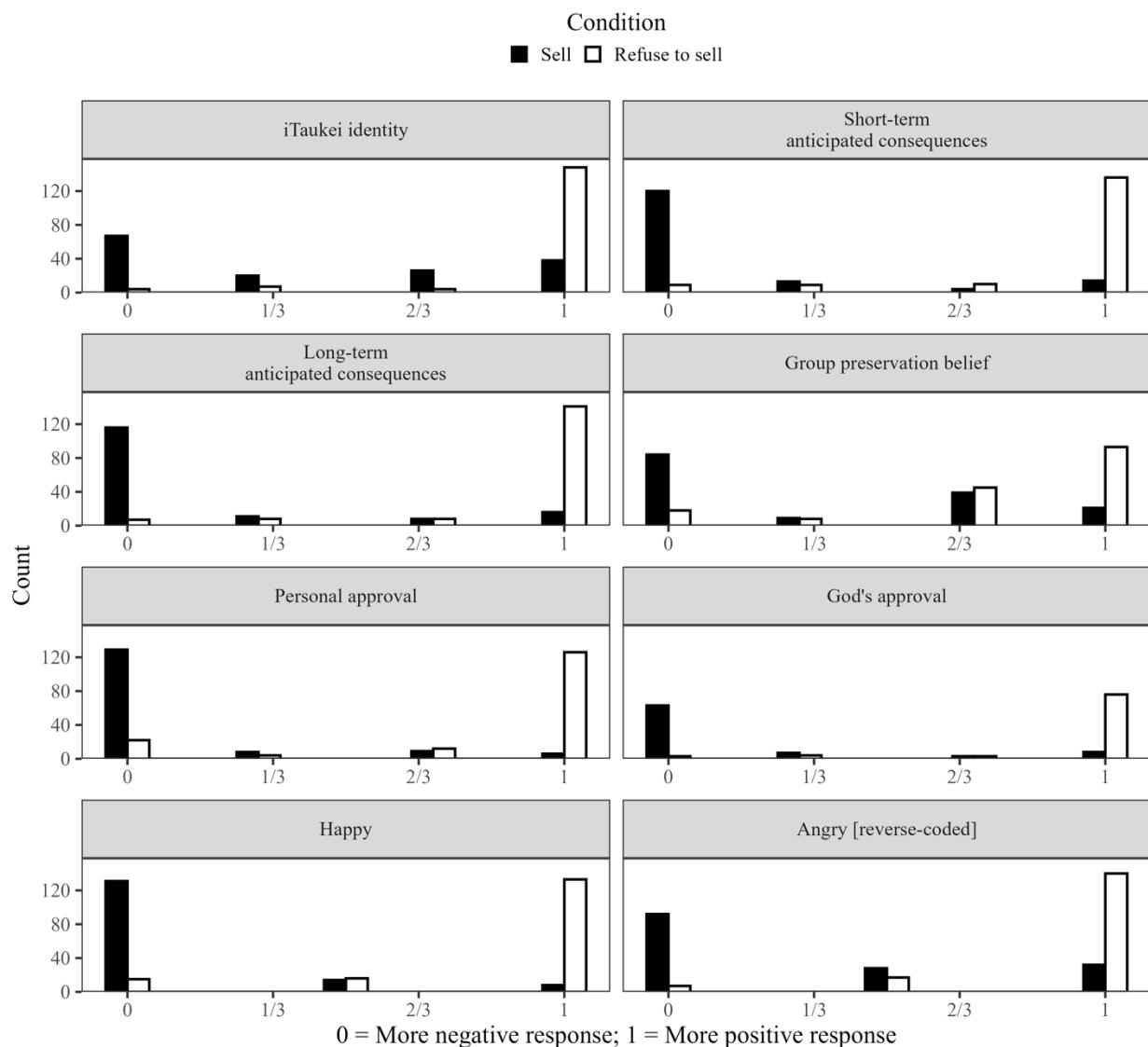


Table 3

Study 2: Results of Wilcoxon Rank Sum Tests Comparing the Conditions

Dependent Variable	<i>n</i> (Sell)	<i>n</i> (Refuse)	Median (Sell)	Median (Refuse)	<i>W</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
iTaukei identity	163	151	1/3	1	20609	< .001	.66
Short-term consequences	164	151	0	1	22612	< .001	.79
Long-term consequences	164	151	0	1	22589	< .001	.79
Group preservation	164	153	0	1	19779	< .001	.52
Personal approval	164	152	0	1	22423	< .001	.76
God's approval	86	81	0	1	6427	< .001	.81
Happy	164	153	0	1	23008	< .001	.80
Angry (reverse-coded)	164	152	0	1	21164	< .001	.67

Note. *p*-values were adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni correction. *r* indicates effect size, reported as rank-biserial correlation.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 demonstrate that for iTaukei, land rights are seen as inextricably linked with iTaukei identity and survival. iTaukei participants strongly disapproved of selling land, primarily because of the negative effect of selling on the survival of iTaukei over the long term. We can see then that in our sample, indigenous land was viewed as essential for group survival. Not only did iTaukei personally disapprove of ingroup members who chose to sell land, they also thought that God would punish these ingroup members and that the act of selling iTaukei land would jeopardize both short- and long-term outcomes, even iTaukei peoplehood. In fact, selling iTaukei land was seen as so taboo that iTaukei participants in our study even viewed this act as disqualifying from group membership. These results provide an in-depth window into potential motivations underlying Study 1 findings, highlighting the perceived importance among

an indigenous population of preserving group-specific rights that have historically been threatened by colonialism. In Study 3, we build upon these findings by asking whether differences in opinion about how rights should be distributed may have downstream consequences for Fiji's democratic health. This question is informed by the fact that Fiji has historically experienced a fragile democracy, which itself is an outcome of British colonial rule.

Study 3: How iTaukei and Indo-Fijians Reason About Democratic Principles

Although Fiji officially prides itself on being a democratic nation, its system has been influenced by a colonial legacy that introduced democracy as part of its governance framework. For iTaukei and Indo-Fijians, whose perspectives on equality and privilege differ significantly, there may be tensions between the universal principles of democracy—rooted in individual rights and equality—and the collective rights that hold particular importance for iTaukei, especially in areas like land ownership.

To examine whether divergent views about the importance of group rights, as discussed in Studies 1 and 2, have implications for democratic practice, we asked participants to evaluate the acceptability of compromising a key democratic norm—the sanctity of the vote—to privilege their group's interests. We also sought to determine whether support for this democratic norm is outweighed by critical group-related priorities, such as core rights participants believe should be extended to or protected for their group members. If group-related priorities are sacred and morally motivated, scenarios that force participants to compromise over two important issues should create a “tragic trade-off”, or a trade-off decision (Tetlock, 2003). In addition, work on the *Value Protection Model of Justice* (Skitka, 2002) would similarly argue that people would be motivated to compromise on societal ideals in order to protect identity-related concerns.

This study explores how individuals navigate potential tragic trade-offs between competing values, shedding light on the tensions between democratic principles and group-specific interests. Both Indo-Fijians and iTaukei may be willing to accept democratic violations when doing so serves their group's priorities—priorities that were shaped and placed into conflict during colonial rule. Specifically, we hypothesized that Indo-Fijians will view violating democracy as more acceptable if it ultimately leads to greater equality. Conversely, we hypothesized that iTaukei would be more accepting of violating democracy when it serves to maintain their group's privilege over Indo-Fijians. This study was preregistered at https://osf.io/2e8dh/?view_only=e0af4154a5c64effba8c711a71b81c95.

Method

Procedure & Materials

Participants (322 iTaukei,⁶ 294 Indo-Fijians) were first presented with a scenario in which a politician instructed supporters to discard votes for their opponent. They were then asked to rate how good or bad they perceived this behavior on a scale from 0 (*very bad*) to 3 (*very good*). This response served as a baseline measure of support for a fundamental democratic norm: the principle that elections should be free, fair, and that every vote carries equal weight (Carey et al., 2019).

We then presented participants with various rationales explaining why fictional politicians might have engaged in the same action. Drawing on insights from focus groups, we developed three reasons specific to each ethno-religious group, aligning with core group interests on highly debated issues. For iTaukei, provided reasons were to prevent Indo-Fijians from purchasing native land (i.e., land that only iTaukei communities can own), to ensure Christian

⁶ After listwise exclusion of three iTaukei participants who did not respond to any of the four items. Seven participants who failed to answer three or fewer questions were excluded pairwise.

iTaukei can continue missionizing, and to prevent an Indo-Fijian from being elected Prime Minister. For Indo-Fijians, reasons were to prevent iTaukei from converting all free-hold land (i.e., land that is available to all) to native land, to protect Hindus' freedom of religion, and to prevent the passage of a law barring Indo-Fijians from being elected Prime Minister. Participants rated how good or bad they perceived the politician's behavior as being for each provided motivation.

Results

To account for the non-independence of responses to the four democratic violations (within-subject conditions) within participants (ICC = .79), we conducted a multilevel regression with reasons for democratic violation as dummy-coded predictors (with baseline/no reason as reference). Because the dependent variables showed extreme positive skew (see Figure 2), we used a Poisson model.⁷ We report incident rate ratios (IRR), which indicate how much more likely it is for participants (as a function of each provided reason compared to the baseline condition) to judge the democratic violation as less bad. Results are shown in Table 4.

As predicted, both iTaukei and Indo-Fijians rated the democratic violation, at baseline, as very bad (IRR = 0.04, $p < .001$). Also as predicted, members of both ethnoreligious groups were more likely to appraise this democratic violation as being less bad when it was justified with a group-serving motivation (IRRs > 5.28 , $ps < .001$).

⁷ We preregistered mixed linear models, the results of which are reported in the Supplementary Materials. Overall results did not change (see Tables S4 and S5 and Figure S1). We additionally report ancillary models testing for Group as a covariate (See S2.1 and Table S6), for differences from neutral at baseline (See S2.2), as well as for relations between individuals own views and on the provision of rights and democratic violations (see S2.3 and Tables S7 and S8)

Figure 2

Study 3: Distribution of Responses to Each Democratic Violation

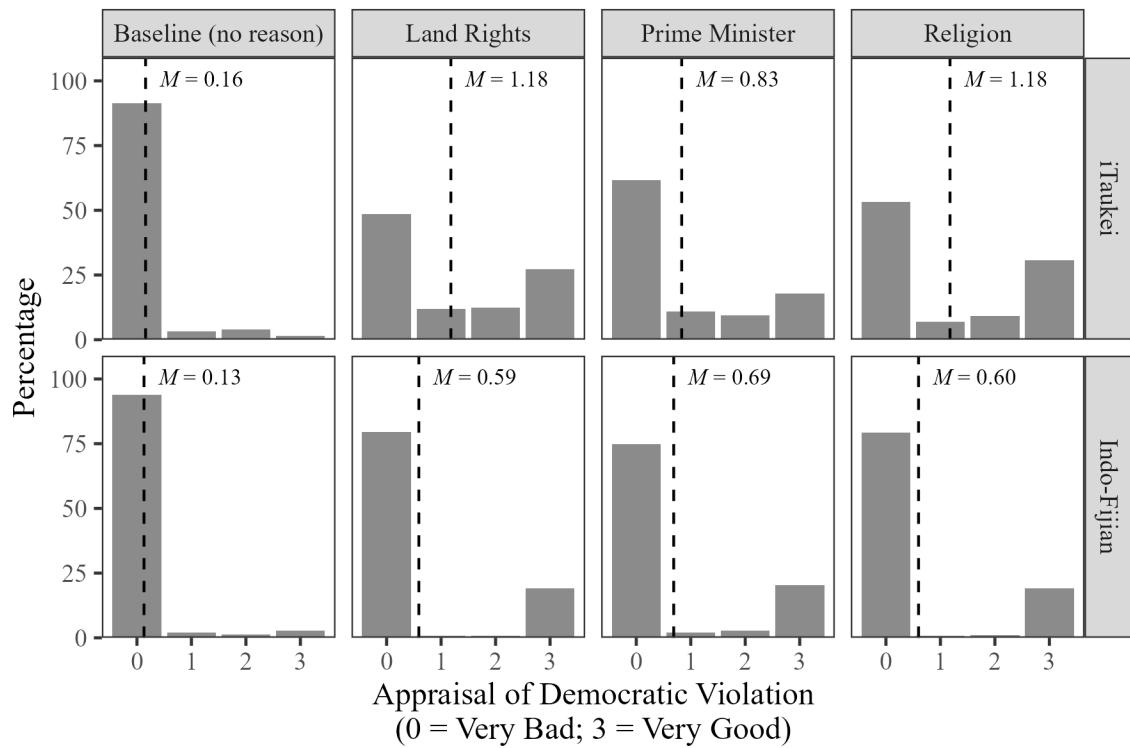


Table 4*Study 3: Results of the Poisson Regression*

Predictor	Incidence Rate Ratio	95% CI	Z	p
(Intercept)	0.04	[0.03, 0.05]	-20.25	< .001
Group (.5 = iTaukei, -.5 = Indo-Fijians)	3.19	[1.81, 5.61]	4.02	< .001
Land Rights	5.84	[4.65, 7.34]	15.14	< .001
Prime Minister	5.28	[4.20, 6.65]	14.24	< .001
Religion	5.86	[4.67, 7.37]	15.18	< .001
Group x Land Rights	1.63	[1.03, 2.57]	2.09	.037
Group x Prime Minister	0.99	[0.63, 1.56]	-0.05	.960
Group x Religion	1.60	[1.01, 2.53]	2.02	.043
Random Effects				
σ^2	0.61			
$\tau_{00\text{ ID}}$	3.59			
ICC	0.85			
N_{ID}	616			
Observations	2452			
Marginal R^2 / Conditional R^2	0.203 / 0.884			

Note. The results were obtained using the *lme4* package in *R* (Bates et al., 2015).

To ease interpretation, we report simple effects for each group, comparing each provided reason to the baseline (no reason) condition. iTaukei believed that democratic violations were significantly less bad (compared to the no reason baseline, $\text{IRR} = 0.06, p < .001$) when carried out to protect their exclusive right to own most land in Fiji ($\text{IRR} = 7.45, p < .001$), ensure that Christian iTaukei remain allowed to missionize ($\text{IRR} = 7.42, p < .001$), and to ensure that Indo-Fijians never get elected Prime Minister ($\text{IRR} = 5.25, p < .001$). Similarly, Indo-Fijians believed that democratic violations were significantly less bad (compared to the no reason baseline, $\text{IRR} = 0.02, p < .001$) when carried out to prevent iTaukei from further limiting land ownership rights ($\text{IRR} = 4.58, p < .001$), prevent Christianity from being enshrined as the official religion of Fiji

(IRR = 4.63, $p < .001$), and to prevent a law from being passed to bar Indo-Fijians from serving as prime minister (IRR = 5.32, $p < .001$).

Notably, there were significant interactions with group membership, such that compared to Indo-Fijians, iTaukei were more likely to rate the democratic violations as less bad when they concerned land rights (IRR = 1.63, $p = .037$) and religious freedom (IRR = 1.60, $p = .043$). Group membership did not affect the likelihood of negative appraisal for the Prime Minister issue. We are cautious in interpreting these differences, as we do not know whether they derived from general differences in beliefs about democratic norm violations, or whether they resulted from different meanings associated with the specific set of items constructed for each group.

Discussion

Collectively, our results indicate that while support for democracy—and the sanctity of the vote—is strong in the abstract, it weakens when democratic violations are perceived to advance group-specific interests. This finding highlights a tension in Fiji between the universal democratic principles of individual rights and equality, and the collective rights that hold particular importance for iTaukei, such as land ownership. For both iTaukei and Indo-Fijians, group-related priorities often take precedence over the sanctity of democratic norms, suggesting that democracy may be viewed more as a tool for achieving group goals than as a societal ideal.

General Discussion

Across three studies, we examined how past geopolitical conflict and colonial legacies shape how groups reason about rights, focusing on iTaukei and Indo-Fijians in Fiji. Our findings demonstrate that groups reason differently about rights, with Indigenous iTaukei more likely to prioritize collective rights tied to their identity and land, while Indo-Fijians predominantly advocate for individual rights, likely reflecting their historical struggle for representation and

inclusion. Overall, results suggest that these different lenses are applied to specific contexts relevant to the effects of settler-colonialism, rather than being a function of general cultural differences.

Communal differences in how collective and individual rights were balanced varied depending on the issue at hand. While Indo-Fijians invariably favored individual rights, iTaukei strongly favored collective rights on issues essential to their society, like land, and favored individual rights in certain contexts, like the right to medical care. These differing perspectives illustrate how colonial legacies, and socio-political histories leave lasting psychological impacts on both indigenous and displaced populations.

We tested these dynamics across several domains salient to Fiji's social and political landscape. In Study 1, we explored attitudes toward equality across various social and political issues, finding that iTaukei were more likely to favor inequality for issues tied to colonialism—such as land ownership and political representation—while Indo-Fijians overwhelmingly endorsed equality. Study 2 focused specifically on iTaukei perspectives on land ownership, a sacred issue central to their identity. Here, we found that granting equality on land rights was perceived as fundamentally threatening to the survival of iTaukei as a group. Study 3 extended these findings by examining how these values influence support for democratic norms. While both iTaukei and Indo-Fijians generally viewed democratic violations as unacceptable, both groups were more willing to tolerate such violations when they served their group's interests. For iTaukei, these violations were more acceptable when tied to protecting indigenous land rights or maintaining political dominance, while Indo-Fijians found them more acceptable if they advanced equality or protected their political representation. It is important to note that our

sample was not fully representative of the broader populations, so caution is warranted when interpreting descriptive findings.

Although our studies were based on hypothetical scenarios, they shed light on real issues facing the people of Fiji and the forces that shape how they perceive these challenges. The tension between individual and collective rights reflects the broader struggle between universal democratic principles and the preservation of cultural and political autonomy (Roth, 2018). Our findings suggest that for indigenous communities, frameworks that prioritize individual rights may be viewed as a continuation of colonial harm, while displaced groups may see equality as a necessary corrective to historical exclusion. This lays bare the delicate balance required for just and peaceful intercommunal relations in Fiji.

These insights go beyond the context of Fiji and highlight broader post-colonial dynamics and the role of Western frameworks in shaping global discourse on rights, governance, and democracy. By examining how post-colonial dynamics influence intergroup relations, we draw attention to assumptions embedded in dominant Western political and moral ideologies. This calls for not only expanding research beyond WEIRD contexts but also highlights the importance of not simply transposing WEIRD conceptual frameworks onto non-Western settings (Adams et al., 2015). Working with a group that has previously been colonized requires adapting the research process to de-colonize the methods we use in the field. Although some efforts were taken, many others lay frameworks to help researchers improve upon this process (Pe-Pua, 2006; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). In this final section, we consider the broader implications of this research and reflect on our role as Western researchers working in a formerly colonized environment.

Broaden the Scope: Fiji as One Case Among Many

Colonial histories have shaped societies across the world. As social psychologists, we have a responsibility to broaden the scope of research to examine how historical and structural forces—such as the enduring legacies of colonialism—shape individual and group psychologies. In the case of Fiji, we highlighted how colonial history continues to influence intergroup relations, democratic attitudes, and beliefs about societal organization. Understanding these processes can help shed light on the experiences, needs, and values of other colonized populations.

While our findings provide insight into the psychological impact of colonial legacies in Fiji, they also raise broader questions about how similar geopolitical histories shape attitudes toward rights, governance, and intergroup relations in other contexts. Although there is reason to expect some generalizability, colonial experiences vary widely, and their effects are mediated by local histories, cultural frameworks, and political structures. A one-size-fits-all approach risks oversimplifying complex realities. We encourage future research to build on this work by conducting field studies that center local perspectives and foster collaborative partnerships with the communities under study. Only through such approaches can we move toward a more nuanced and globally representative understanding of how colonial histories continue to shape human psychology and society.

Self-Reflection On Our Work and Findings

The research represents a collaboration between researchers from the Global North and Fiji. However, we recognize that this collaboration was not equal. As with much cross-cultural work, power imbalances were inherent in our roles: the researchers from the Global North had access to funding, designed the initial research program, and employed the Fijian researchers. While we actively sought to avoid extractive research practices (Haelewaters, et al., 2021), we

acknowledge the challenges of conducting research in a formerly colonized society, particularly when hierarchies between researchers and participants mirror broader colonial power dynamics.

In our case, this hierarchy was reinforced by the fact that our research involved academically trained researchers with advanced degrees studying communities where most people had limited experience with research and its institutions. Cultural norms in Fiji, which emphasize respect and agreeableness—particularly in interactions with authority figures—may have further shaped these dynamics. Additionally, receiving official approval from the Fijian government likely reinforced our credibility, which could have made participants more hesitant to challenge our assumptions or express differing views. However, our collaborative approach aimed to mitigate these effects by fostering open dialogue and co-developing the research process with community members.

The Impact of Researcher Framing

One of the most important aspects of this work was understanding how our own research questions and framing shaped the studies' trajectories. We initially approached this project with a focus on intergroup conflict. However, this was not the only lens through which this work could have been framed. Had we instead centered the perspectives and priorities of iTaukei and Indo-Fijians from the outset, the studies might have looked quite different. Rather than focusing on conflict over rights, for example, the research could have been framed as examining indigenous resilience, community adaptation to historical injustices, or how these groups have built shared civic spaces despite their histories of tension. This alternative framing would not have ignored existing conflict but would have situated it within a broader narrative of endurance and cultural continuity.

Similarly, our assumptions—shaped by a liberal democratic framework—led us to originally presume that democratic norms, such as equal voting rights and universal suffrage, would be viewed as an inherent good by all parties. Through focus groups and conversations with our local team members and research assistants, we came to understand that such assumptions risked imposing a Western moral framework onto a complex historical and cultural reality. Many iTaukei participants did not see equality in the abstract as an unquestioned good, particularly when it seemed to threaten collective rights they viewed as essential for their cultural survival. In this context, the concept of universal individual rights—so central to Western democratic ideals—was not simply accepted as neutral but was often perceived as a continuation of colonial harm. Engaging in this process of critical reflection led us to shift from prescriptive assumptions to active listening. Rather than treating equality as an unquestioned ideal, we had to ask: equality in service of what, and for whom?

These realizations reinforced the importance of recognizing how pre-existing research questions, shaped by the social, academic, and cultural environments of the researchers, can steer inquiry in ways that may not align with local understandings of history, justice, and identity. While all research necessarily involves selecting particular aspects of reality to study, it is crucial to remain open to the possibility that the most pressing questions for a given community may not be the ones an outsider would initially think to ask. Working in such a collaboration requires not only to interrogate our own assumptions but also creating space for alternative perspectives to shape the research agenda itself.

Final Reflections. We are deeply indebted to the hundreds of individuals who generously shared their time, perspectives, and experiences with us, shaping not only this research but also our own understanding of Fiji's social and political landscape. Meaningful research in a formerly colonized country cannot simply be imposed from the outside; it requires a willingness to listen, adapt, and allow participants to guide the questions in ways that authentically reflect their lived realities. Our role as researchers, then, was not merely to document, but to learn—from the communities we engaged with and from the research assistants who played a critical role in bridging perspectives. This experience underscored the importance of fostering reciprocal relationships in research, where knowledge production is not extractive but collaborative. We hope that, through this work, the voices of our participants and research partners will resonate beyond academic spaces, offering a platform that brings their insights and histories into broader conversations on postcolonial dynamics, governance, and rights.

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