

***TUIRARA, THE STANDING ONE: A SOCIO-  
RHETORICAL READING OF ACTS 6: 1-7 IN THE  
CONTEXT OF *TUIRARA-TALATALA*  
RELATIONSHIP IN THE METHODIST CHURCH IN  
FIJI***

A Thesis Presented to the  
Faculty of the Pacific Theological College  
Suva

In Partial Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Theology

by

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September, 2019

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores Acts 6: 1-7 in an attempt to respond to the work and the ambiguous relationship of the Tuirara and the Talatala in the Methodist Church in Fiji (MCIF). It begins with what I call the current context of Tuirara and Talatala relationship where the latter is viewed as superior to the former. Such attitudinal gap has caught my attention as a member of the congregation before I joined the ordained ministry. This thesis renders a response to address this gap through the Socio-Rhetorical Criticism of Acts 6:1-7, a foundational text that is used within the MCIF to define the work and functions of a Tuirara. The socio-rhetorical approach reveals the conspicuous status of the Tuirara as the 'Standing one'. This view then calls the Talatala and MCIF to un-learn and re-learn Tuirara functions as they both have equal standing through socio-rhetorical perspective.

## DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis, which is 32, 024 words in length (excluding the bibliography and front matter), has been written by me, that it is the result of work carried out by me, and that it has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, in any previous written work for an academic award at this or any other academic institution.

I also declare that this thesis has not used any material, heard or read, without academically appropriate acknowledgment of the source.

Signed:  \_\_\_\_\_

Date: September 6<sup>th</sup> 2019

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this Thesis to all the hardworking Tuirara serving in the Methodist Church in Fiji, especially Metuisela Bogiva the former Tuirara of Bulu Circuit School in Gau and Josaia Gauna Vela the Tuirara of Nakauvadra High School.

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## Acknowledgments

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.<sup>1</sup>*

First and foremost I acknowledge the wisdom, the guidance, providence of our loving gracious God not only in successfully fulfilling the completion of this Thesis but also my whole period of study at PTC.

I believe, God has appointed his own servants, institutions, families and friends who may directly or indirectly assist me in my study in PTC. Without them, I would have not been able to conquer all the challenges and find this Thesis come to fruition.

To my supervisor, Professor Holger Szesnat, I cannot thank you enough for the gift you poured unto me through your critical and analytical comments that guided this Thesis throughout the whole process. My prayer goes that the blessings and wisdom of God continue to shower upon you.

To Dr. Kathryn Imray, thank you very much for the advice and assistance you gave in my first year when my supervisor Professor Holger was on sabbatical leave.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3: 17.



To Sailosi Batiratu, thank you very for the commitment you gave in proof reading this Thesis. May god continue to bless you and the family.

To Rev Taniela Balenaikorodawa, I must take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank you for the time you gave in proof reading and providing some technical assistance. Peace and blessings of God be always with you and the family.

My gratitude is also extended to the College librarian Nalini Premadish and your assistants Suliana Moce and Ana Mamatuki. To the IT personnels Saimoni Tuilaulala and Lorima Malo, I also would like to extend thank you very much for your expertise and commitment. May the Lord continue to shower his blessing over you and your family!

I also would like to extend tremendous gratitude and appreciation to the Principal Dr. Upolu Luma Va'ai and former Principal Professor Feleterika Nokise, the faculty, support staff, and members of PTC community. May the peace and blessing of God almighty always be with you!

To my home church, the Methodist Church in Fiji, especially the President, the General Secretary, all the Talatala, Vakatawa, Tuirara and all the lay members, thank you very much for the Scholarship, the support and your prayers. May the will of the Lord continue to be done in the Church!

To my extended family, the Vatanitawake, the Soba, the Senivota, the vanua ko Naisogoika, the vanua ko Korocau, the vanua ko Nakaunakoro, the vanua ko Vatoa and all my friends who I may not mention, your prayers and support are deeply appreciated. Peace and grace of the Lord be with you!

Last but not the least to my wife Seruwaia Vataniwake, our daughter Nanise Didache Vatanitawake and my mother in law Marica Lasa, my deepest appreciation to you for your care, patience, love and support which kept the conquering spirit alive and saw the completion of this thesis. Let the will of the Lord be done in our family as it is in Heaven.

May honour, glory and praise be to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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## List of Abbreviations

Gen-	Genesis
Lk-	Luke
Mk-	Mark
Matt-	Matthew
MCIF-	Methodist Church in Fiji
Vs-	Verse
Vss-	Verses

## Introduction

Acts 6: 1-7 is a very influential text for the work of Church Stewards and Church Ministers in the Methodist Church in Fiji (MCIF). Without doubt, the text has been the object of interpretation for many centuries. Add to those the efforts of various churches within 58 divisions of the MCIF. Church Stewards (referred to as Tuirara in the Methodist Church) and Ministers (Talatala) both are the outcome of all these interpretations with varying degrees of support of superiority for one over the other. The understanding of this paper is that the latter is more privileged than the former.

My intention is not to undermine the Church structure or the established responsibilities of both the Tuirara and Talatala. However, the purpose of this thesis is to empower the Tuirara by exploring the nature of Tuirara and Talatala in the Methodist Church in Fiji and the fundamental aspects in their relationship in light of Acts 6: 1-7. What is the relevance of the discourse in Acts 6: 1-7 to the position of Talatala and Tuirara in the MCIF? What can be learned from the election of servants in Acts 6: 1-7 that can positively influence the relationship between Tuirara and Talatala and the MCIF as a whole? Personally, while reading Acts 6: 1-7 I ask, how can I address the Tuirara-Talatala relationship as a means of

empowering the Tuirara? The objectives of the thesis are: To encourage Tuirara to stand up to the very significant responsibility they are carrying on their shoulders; and to remind the Talatala to refrain from using Tuirara as “*vakarawa ni lomadra*” or as a means for personal (Talatala’s) gain. Their combined energies, however, can definitely be useful to benefit Church members and the Church as a whole.

This investigation is important because Tuirara in the MCIF have to be empowered. They need to stand up to their rightful roles in the Church. I am mindful of the fact that they have been faithful and committed to their responsibilities. However, this paper is written to clarify specific roles of Tuirara which has either been overlooked or they have been hindered in the way Talatala treated them thus avoiding them from performing their rightful task to the fullest. If they stand up for their roles and responsibilities, I believe, the church’s wealth will be better protected; members, especially the unprivileged, will be better served which can result in an increase in the number of Church members.

In this paper I hope to present a process of interpretation guided by Socio-rhetorical criticism that rereads Acts 6: 1-7 in response to the issue. At the end of the investigation process Church Ministers and Church Stewards should be encouraged to dialogue and mend the gap between them. In addition, Stewards

should also be persuaded to stand up boldly and perform their rightful purpose without hindrances.

This paper is written with the optimism to enliven some hope for increasing the number of MCIF members. The continuing drop in the number of members in the Methodist Church in Fiji in recent years is alarming. Numerous concerns on the church membership decline have been raised in recent Conferences but the trend has not been arrested. I believe revisiting component parts of Acts 6: 1-7 can lead to an increase in church members.

Acts 6: 1-7 is investigated in this paper as an episode presented in a “relatively independent unit” (Richard 1978, 312). The outcomes of the investigation should coincide with the issue of relooking at the relationship between the Talatala and Tuirara in the MCIF.

The first chapter contains the background of the investigation consisting of the accounts that led to this research. It comprise of my personal interest in the relationship between Tuirara (Church Stewards) and Talatala (Minister) in the MCIF. I view the space between a Tuirara and a Talatala as a problem in regards to the way they handle their responsibilities.

In the second chapter I will attempt to discuss Socio-rhetorical approach as the approach guiding me not only to exegete Acts 6:1-7 but also to innovatively

create a response to the issue at hand. There are two rather different ways I have come to learn about the socio-rhetorical approach; Ben Witherington (1998) adopted Hanz Dieter Betz and George Kennedy approach that from a historical perspective, they analyse New Testament documents using ancient Graeco-Roman rhetoric (Gooder 2009, 71). However, this paper will adopt the socio-rhetorical approach pioneered by Vernon K. Robbins.

The third chapter encompasses the application of the socio-rhetorical methodology into Acts 6: 1-7. The study comprises the four textures out of the five textural analyses adopted from Robbins. Accordingly, it follows Robbin's order of textures: inner texture, intertexture, socio and cultural texture, then ideological texture. The approach offers an opportunity for the author to engage in applying some of the interested subtopics from the four texture analyses.

The fourth chapter discusses the outcomes of analysis from Chapter 3 before exploring the concept of the Tuirara and its implications and how it is related with the service of the seven in Acts 6: 1-7.

In the conclusion, I will provide a recollection of the significance in this whole thesis. A few limitations of the research are presented while three potential areas for research are highlighted. Last but not the least are a few proposals I would



like to put forward for the MCIF regarding the empowerment of the Tuirara and their work.

Since the context of my studies is the MCIF I will naturally make most discussions in the 'Fijian language' (Vosa Vakaviti). Therefore, I have chosen not to write the Fijian language (Vosa Vakaviti) in the italic text.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Tuirara and Acts 6: 1-7: Exploring the Problem**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

This chapter contains the reasons for this study. Like a pregnant woman in labour, this chapter holds the interest of waiting for the new born baby. Nothing seems easy; there is pain, there are risks, there may be other problems and unforeseen complications. However, there is also motivation; encouragement that behind every difficult moment is a positive outcome. In that sense, if this chapter presents the woman in labour, Chapter 2 will present the doctor who does the operation at birth, Chapter 3 presents the labour ward where the operation of birth takes place and we wait for the new born child in Chapter 4. In fact this chapter presents my personal reflections. In other words, the Tuirara and Talatala issue has been in my mind for many years driving me to revisit Acts 6: 1-7.

#### **1.2. Realisation of My Dream**

I am at a point where the realisation has set in that it is no longer a dream but more imperative to use this platform to express my concerns regarding the relationship between Church Stewards and Ministers in the MCIF. It has always

been on my mind to address the problem that often arises between a Talatala and a Tuirara. This has been my concern as a mature Methodist iTaukei Christian to realise the ill treatment, if one may call it that, in that relationship.

Consequently the MCIF, from my own personal view, has been reading Acts 6: 1-7 with the structural lens that often places Church Ministers like the apostles at the top of the structure while the rest are followers – disciples; followers waiting for directives from the top before they make a move. The interpretation of texts such Acts 6: 1-7 is dependent upon such a mind-set.

### **1.3. My Convictions**

The continuing gaps between members of the clergy and laity have been part of the MCIF's history. By stating the word gap in this paper, emphasises my personal concern about this relationship. Christians explicitly believe Acts 6: 1-7, like many other biblical texts, offers reconciliation. However, I must admit through my own personal observation, reading a text such Acts 6: 1-7 has either directly or indirectly pushed the Tuirara<sup>1</sup> (MCIF Steward) and Talatala<sup>2</sup> (MCIF Minister)

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<sup>1</sup> From here on, I will be using the word Tuirara in reference to the MCIF Stewards in Fiji, also known as Methodist Church Deacon.

<sup>2</sup> From here on, the word Talatala refers to a Minister of the Methodist Church in Fiji.

apart. This happens in the context of Acts 6: 1-7 which is generally accepted by the members of MCIF and church hierarchy, as the biblical foundation of the Tuirara's work. In fact, the MCIF Conference of 2003 declared "Acts 6: 1-7 as the biblical foundation of the Tuirara and their work particularly in reference to those serving at the table." In the iTaukei Fijian translation "Me sa yavu vakaivolatabu ni cakacaka vakatuirara nai vola ni nodratou Cakacaka nai Apositolo ... Cakacaka 6: 1-7" (Kanailagi 2007, 22). Besides, the content of the book has been taught to most, if not all, church members making it as the widely accepted basis for the Tuirara position. Given that perspective, it is my intention to call the seven chosen in Acts 1: 1-7 as the first Tuirara.

Luke in Acts 6: 1-7 presents the continuous effective work of the Apostles and the beginning of 'the seven' (those serving at the table) later referred to as, "diaconal service or deacon" (Keller and Moore 1987, 8). However, my main concern which often raises many questions in my mind is the tendency that this same text demarcates clearly the work of the Talatala and the Tuirara in the MCIF today. On the one hand is the Tuirara, who is a laity, approved by the Church to be the overseer of properties and wealth of the Church.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Talatala is

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<sup>3</sup> Further clarification of the term Tuirara and their responsibility see pages 25-30.

defined in the *Constitution of the Methodist Church in Fiji (2016)* “Ministers of the Word, Sacraments and Pastoral Care are men and women who believe that God is calling them to full-time service in that ministry and who in answer to that call, apply, and are accepted, trained and ordained in the Conference” (Article 3.3.2, 6). The constitution, like the text, does not explicitly identify the gap but it draws a boundary by defining the roles and responsibilities of the Talatala and Tuirara. Ultimately through interpretation a tag of superiority and inferiority will be attached to either one relative to the other.

#### **1.4. Text as a Problem**

Luke, when he was writing Acts 6: 1-7 implicitly indicated his own purpose for readers. Undoubtedly, he had good intentions for the Apostles, the first seven chosen to serve at the table, and members of the newfound community. Likewise the MCIF has also shown great efforts in upholding the roles of the Tuirara and Talatala, who are both integral to the effective operation of the church. However, my upbringing has compelled me to occupy an in-between space where Acts 6: 1-7 at times benefits Talatala more in terms of respect and honour compared with that which is accorded to a Tuirara.

Historically, Jesus' disciples or the Apostles were the leading figures since the ascension of Jesus Christ until the writing of the Book of Acts. The Book of Acts and the Apostles' leadership not only present the thriving growth of believers after the ascension of Jesus but also introduce issues that crept in during the peak moment of their evangelism. Under investigation here is a community that is no different from any other facing many problems and issues that need to be addressed. In other words Acts 6: 1-7 is an obvious example of communities grappling with issues. As recorded in the Acts 6: 1-7 narrative, the Hellenists were complaining against the Hebrews who distributed food unfairly with regards to their widows.

According to text, the issue was raised in the presence of the twelve Apostles. In response, they said "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." The response, according to the text, pleased the whole community which was relevant to that particular community. From my perspective, there is embedded in the passage an issue of a developing gap between

administering the word and serving at the table that will always challenge future development of Christian communities.

Upon careful observation I am impressed with the text when the disciples said they could not leave the Word to serve at the table. From my point of view, at that moment they implicitly established not only a new responsibility but through their very definition the Apostles, drew a new boundary. That boundary drives my personal enthusiasm to ask many questions: Does Apostolic succession not allowed serving at the table? Does serving at the table hinder the preaching of the Word of God? Is the text also serving as beginning of an inferior calling for deacons compared to a superior calling for Apostles?

### **1.5. Domination Problem**

The usual impression in my context is that those who preach the word: Talatala, are more important than those serving at the table: Tuirara. To make it even more problematic, in my context, it has always been the usual pulpit lens of the Talatala to make sense about the relevance of the text that is normally applied to text like Acts 6: 1-7. The anthropologist Matt Tomlinson did his study in Fiji and he found out that a minister was not happy with sermons and he called the local preachers to counsel and advise them (2009, 86). He also found out that some local

preachers asked for notes from Rev. Serewai their circuit minister then and Rev. Tuikilakila Waqairatu's<sup>4</sup> sermon notes and used almost all ideas in the sermon for their own preaching (2009, 88-89). These are some examples of how dominant and influential Talatala are in the iTaukei community.

The Tuirara are also preachers who prepare their own sermons or are given the liberty to interpret the Bible and apply its relevance to their audience. In fact, they are not prohibited to preach a sermon based on Acts 6: 1-7 or any other related text. In my experience, Tuirara like any other ordinary church member, with utmost respect for their Talatala, will opt to interpret the text in such a way to honour the Talatala.

This is due to the belief that the twelve disciples became apostles because they were sent by Jesus himself and Talatala is in that line of apostolic succession.<sup>5</sup> The Tuirara on the other hand, flows from the succession of deacons selected through the leadership of the apostles. Somehow, the process makes it more

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<sup>4</sup> Rev Tuikilakila Waqairatu was the principal of Davuilevu Theological College then and later became the MCIF President.

<sup>5</sup> I remember in one of our lectures when I was a theological student; we learned that Methodist Minister is accepted in the MCIF to be in line with the apostolic succession. That is one of the reasons that we as Ministers are the only group of clergies permitted to conduct the only two sacraments in the Methodist Church: Baptism and Holy Communion. On the other hand the duty of the Tuirara in the MCIF is somewhat the continuation of the Diaconal duty as in Acts : 6: 1- 7.



convenient to be interpreted as the superiority of Talatala in relation to the Tuirara's inferiority. In addition, Talatala not only preach but also teaches lay preachers how to preach a sermon. In the Talatala's teaching approaches, often the banking model<sup>6</sup> of education is dominant, as information flows in a "one way traffic" with little to no interaction.

On this note, I refer to the late Rev. Tomasi Kanailagi, a former President of the MCIF in his book<sup>7</sup> written especially for the work of the Tuirara, he noted a motion in the Conference of 2003. "Era laurai ni ra vakaturi ira [Tuirara] era dau veivolekati ka rawarawa na nodra vakaiotaka na veika era gadreva na I Talatala" (2007, 24-25). I translated this as, "It has been brought to our attention that Ministers always propose the names of the one (to be Tuirara) who can be close to him thus making it easier to agree to whatever the minister wishes to do." The problem arises when Church ministers use Tuirara as the main channel to do their

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<sup>6</sup> The banking model of education is an oppressive method which Freire explains as "depositing" of information ('banking') by teachers to their students, "collectors". This is evident in the learning spaces where teachers and facilitators deposit information into their audiences with no interactions/discussions. The leader is expecting to get the same amount when he/she withdraws, thus getting the same answer from the students/congregation who renders answers with little encounter.

<sup>7</sup> "Na Cakacaka Vakatuirara"

own will<sup>8</sup>. This is sometimes done outside appropriate Church meetings or at times brought in the appropriate meetings with Talatala's prior influence. The late Kanailagi called this issue "malumalumu" (2007, 24) which means it is a weakness between Tuirara and Talatala. This is in my own biased view a clear indication of the domination of Talatala over Tuirara.

It makes me wonder about the gaps or space(s) between a Minister and a Tuirara. Since almost every Talatala is in a very tempting situation to lord it over Tuirara, there is a possibility of a gap between them. According to my interviewees: Volavola (2019), Buadromo (2019), Ratabacaca (2019), Vatanitawake (2019), Talatala and Tuirara should be "veitokani voleka", "a close companion or partnership in ministry." Their statements give me the impression that this is a well-known principle of their performance in ministry for both the Talatala and the Tuirara in the MCIF. On the same note, I also took some time to listen to some church groups on this topic and their response was twofold: "eso nai Talatala sa tuga vei ira na lewa ni Tabacakacaka"; "eso nai Talatala era dau veirogorogoci kei ira na nodra Tuirara." My translations, "Some Talatala are authoritative within

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<sup>8</sup> The Fijian phrase used is "rawarawa na nodra vakaiotaka naka era gadreva nai Talatala" means Tuirara are becoming easily convinced by the request of the Talatala. With that phrase we take into consideration that the Tuirara in the Fijian Churches were the responsible position in a church for collecting gifts, offerings (e.g. money etc) of a Church or a circuit.

their circuit” and “some Talatala have a very good relationship with their Tuirara, they listen to their Tuirara.” They added, “The latter paints a picture of how a MCIF community should work but the approach of the former is unacceptable.”<sup>9</sup>

Any reader can easily appreciate the positive comments but the negative is part of the factor that inspires my personal enthusiasm to focus on this study. In addition, I ask where is the dialogue that shows the relational bond between Tuirara and Talatala? Are they (either Tuirara or Talatala) comfortable with the gap? Asking these questions, I have at the back of my mind the consciousness of how tempting it is for one to lord it over those below them. Personally, a widening gap between me as a Talatala and my Tuirara causes me some discomfort.

## 1.6. Motivating Factor

My motivation to write this paper comes from two Tuirara whom I served with in my only two postings as a Talatala where I served for eight years as a school

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<sup>9</sup> Negative statement such as this cannot be stated in front of Talatala due to the usual utmost respect accorded to them. I still can vividly remember when I was a small boy the words of the Chiefs and Church elders saying to me, “Veitalia ga era cala, yalo malumalumu ga, kua ni vakaulubale” which means “Even though the Talatala may be wrong in decision making, I as a church member should always humble myself in their presence or do not complain. However, I visited these church groups as a Talatala knowing that they would never talk about a negative side of the Talatala’ performance especially that I’m a Talatala. It took a well explained reason of fulfilling this study for them to be able to at least give me some information like the one paraphrased above.

chaplain. What struck me the most is how they treated me as a Talatala. The respect they had for me was astounding. Every time I tried to show my respect and reach out to them, these two Tuirara would explicitly show they were uncomfortable with my attempts. Consequently, they maintained that gap between us as their way of demonstrating respect for me so much so that they were ready to accept my request over a meeting resolution. For instance, any need concerning the welfare of my family became a priority for them. Without any further inquiry regarding the facts about Talatala's issue, these Tuirara would never hesitate to act based on what I said as a Talatala. In all honesty, those times would have been an opportune time to take advantage of their respect. However, my continuous asking of why the Tuirara acted so, prompt me to respect them and their position. This cautioned against any action taken in haste but to wait for the appropriate forum to resolve all the issues we faced. They are two very good examples of Tuirara who represented the respect church members have for the Talatala.

It must be made known that I am the third Talatala in four generations of my paternal family. My grandfather Pauliasi Vatanitawake is not only a retired minister, but also a son of the late Iliesa Vatanitawake. My father was a church catechist who oversaw one or more churches under the leadership of a Talatala. However, I was brought up by my maternal grandmother, a lay person. This

allowed me to live most of my younger days with lay church members. I came to live with my paternal family when I started my high school education. My grandfather took me with him on one of his postings as a Divisional Superintendent but after three years I found myself back with my maternal family. A reason was that members of the laity were hardly found in our compound because of their respect towards the Talatala. Tuirara only came around when he brought my grandfather's stipend. Given my lay upbringing, my paternal family found it hard to contain me in the Minister's compound as I was very fond of being with other lay members of the church. Consequently, I was disciplined numerous times for being absent from home leading to my return to my maternal family.

Then, I pictured myself in a space between Church Ministers and Lay members of the Church. In that space, I began to wonder: How can the gap be bridged? Later when I became a Minister in the MCIF, the conviction I had when I was young had a lot of influence over my decisions in the ministry. It is also a driving factor towards exploring Acts 6: 1-7.

## **1.7. Tuirara**

Tuirara is significant to discuss in this chapter in my attempt to bring to light, what is a Tuirara and its implications? They have significantly contributed to

the MCIF since they were recognised as a part of its structure but there have been fewer written acknowledgements compared to recorded accounts of a Talatala's work.

### **1.7.1. Tuirara in an Ancient Fijian Context**

Tuirara is defined in the “Na iVolavosa Vakaviti” as a noun referred to the one selected by the Vanua<sup>10</sup> to be the traditional distributor of donations and gifts (2005, 680) to the people. As a traditional practice, Tuirara has existed in our iTaukei setting before the arrival of Christianity. In addition, Meo in his edited and translated work of Rokobuli noted a unique responsibility of the Tuirara: To allocate and announce the allocation of food and wealth (2013, 29). This announcement is done, “Whether it is food in a function that needs to be shared or distribution of wealth (yau) - that is whales’ tooth, mats, masi (tapa), bales of cloth etc.” (Baba 2006, 61), is done in a loud voice while all around him wait attentively.

Moreover, the word Tuirara comes from three separate words. “Tu” is a verb which means to stand, therefore the standing one; “i” points to a specific place which is indicated by the succeeding word “rara” referring to an open space like a

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<sup>10</sup> Vanua in this paper refers to a number of tribes that forms a clan in a village. It can also mean few clans in a Fijian iTaukei village.