

**Two cases of memory construction in Fiji:
A theoretical development of collective memory
under globalisation and digital age**

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Abstract

The theory of collective memory argues that remembering is a socially constructed phenomenon. It is society that constructs and provides individuals with norms, beliefs, and ideas about life, and only within the social framework can people memorise the past. Each society develops its own unique social context, and so is the case with collective memory. Even if several social groups witness the same event, their memories differ because of the variations in the social frameworks to which they belong. However, in this globalised and digitised world, where it is no longer possible to construct social memory within isolated frameworks, collective memory can easily cross social borders; such interactions can lead to the development of new collective memory. This article introduces two cases of memory construction regarding ethnic relations between the indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians. The first is based on a powerful political leader's attempt to construct collective memory about past ethnic relations, and the second is the attempt to alter memories of how local Fijians responded when the ship *Syria*, carrying indentured labourers from India, ran aground in 1884. Although their processes were different and their outcomes seem unrelated, this article argues that these two cases are interdependent because of the changing and fluid nature of collective memory. The article concludes that in the study of collective memory in the present era, events in different contexts should be analysed within a single framework.

Keywords: collective memory, Fiji, *Syria* shipwreck, ethnic division, globalisation, digital age

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Introduction

Remembering is a complex yet fascinating phenomenon. While memories are constantly being modified, people are unaware of these changes, believing instead that their memories have remained intact. The modification of memories is brought about by the societies to which people belong. Scholars have long been working on identifying the mechanism through which society constructs, changes, and deletes our memories. This sociological attempt is particularly important when we consider the influence of collective memory on the formation of social identity. Having a shared past and interpreting that past in the same manner nurtures a sense of common identity, and this may assist in preventing confrontations and promoting harmony between social groups.

This paper introduces two processes of memory construction in Fiji: one is how historical memory is used by a powerful political leader, and the other is the attempt to alter collective memory about the *Syria* shipwreck to reflect particular social interests and needs. This paper argues that the two seemingly different processes of memory construction are, in fact, interrelated. To explain this, the paper expands upon the theory of collective memory in order to adapt it to the globalised and digitised world. Globalisation and digital technology have significantly affected how societies construct collective memory. The paper concludes that the two Fijian cases should be treated together and analysed within a single framework.

Collective memory

Memory is not spontaneously produced in people's brains through their own experiences; instead, memorising is a socially constructed phenomenon. Memory is the product of people's interpretations and evaluations of a particular event, for which social context is a requirement. Without social context, there is no reference point where people understand or recognise the past. It is society that provides people with social norms, beliefs, and ideas about life, and only within such social frameworks can people understand and recognise their own world (Halbwachs, 1992). This implies that each society has its own unique collective memory. When different groups witness an event, their memories of it vary because of the unique social frameworks to which they belong.

Our memories are a reaction to current social needs. The function of collective memory is to reproduce pasts based on the social environment in order to justify the state of the current society or to react to its present interests, aims, and concerns. Collective memory prescribes how the members of the group memorise and interpret pasts, what meaning they ascribe to pasts, and how they alter memories depending on the changing social situation. Following social changes, social groups, such as families, interest groups, ethnic groups, and nations, change their interpretations of the past, and the collective memory of the society follows that change. When social frameworks change, individuals also have to alter their memories to fit them into the new social context. The narratives of a social group play a pivotal role in allowing individuals to alter their own memories. Social narratives provide group members with specific meanings to attribute to the past, which are mediated by material items, social practices, and political activities. Material items may include museums, monuments, films, history books, and souvenirs. Commemorative ceremonies, festivals, and rituals can be considered tools of social practices. Political activities may include educational endeavours and messages by political leaders issued on public holidays. Such artificial tools serve the function of stabilising and maintaining a society's collective memory.

Collective memory is also deeply related to the formation of social identity. People are inclined to conform to societal norms, and therefore, intentionally select a specific past to remember or delete from their social memory. This selectiveness enables the sharing of communal values. The important point here is that most memories that individuals possess have not been created through their own experiences but learnt from society, such as their families, institutions, nations, or 'mnemonic communities' (Zerubavel, 1996: 289). In addition, when people join institutions or communities, they experience the historical memories of the community as their own. This entails having pride in the community's past including the experience of emotions related to pain or shame, associated with that past (Zerubavel, 1996). To share such group feeling is a precondition for the formation of group identity.

In relation to this argument, Litvak (2009) emphasises the reciprocal relationship between memory and identity. To develop its own identity, a group emphasises how it is different from others. Images of the past is used to assert a group's uniqueness and difference from others. Often these differences help to mobilize the group's identity. In addition, as Ignatieff (1996) pointed out, 'what you believe to be true depends... on who you believe yourself to be' (114). Therefore, on the one hand, collective identity is an important factor in

deciding which memories the group should retain, and on the other hand, collective memory assists in forming group identity. This interactive relationship between memory and identity is important when analysing social memory and the process of social identity formation.

In sum, studying collective memory and its influence on social identity requires a special focus not only on social tools, cultural events, and political activities, which mediate various memories among members of society and disseminate particular meanings about past events to the public, but also on the social background of how the society reached the point of holding such a specific memory. Since identity strongly affects collective memory, anything stimulating our identities must be scrutinised when analysing collective memory. Such stimulation may include, but is not limited to, discourse disseminated by political elites who try to agitate nationalism, economic development, and relationships with other societies or countries. Even in everyday life, there are numerous factors stimulating identity and collective memory. Although it may not be possible to analyse all factors that affect our identity and memory, memory scholars are required to correctly identify as many of the social factors that affect society as possible.

Fiji: An ethnically divided society

This section briefly explains the history of Fijian ethnic relations, as understanding the background of this ethnic tension will assist readers in better understanding the context of the two cases of memory construction under analysis. Fiji has long been experiencing ethnic confrontations. The majority of the population—nearly two-thirds—is indigenous Fijian (*iTaukei*), and about a third is of Indian origin (Indo-Fijian), most of whom are descendants of indentured labourers who immigrated during the British colonial rule.

During the British colonial period, Fijian society had three main economic players. The first category consisted of the Europeans, who controlled Fijian society and worked as bureaucrats of the colonial government, plantation owners, and merchants. The second category consisted of the Indians, who mainly served as the workforce on sugarcane plantations. The third category consisted of indigenous Fijians, who were engaged in subsistence agriculture, and basically did not participate in the monetary economy (Wilson, 2012). Historically, monetary economic activities were dominated by Europeans and settlers, and the living spaces of indigenous populations were limited to rural villages. On the basis of such boundaries, along with ethnicity, the indigenous Fijians were at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, while Europeans were located at the top and Indian descendants made up the middle tier. This colonial form of stratification and associated political and economic policies affected the collective perception of indigenous Fijians, instilling within them a sense of inferiority, which has lasted to the present day.

From the *iTaukei*'s point of view, the political leadership should be in their hands because of their position at the bottom of the economic hierarchy (Naidu, 2013). This demand has strengthened with the increase of the Indo-Fijian population; the Indo-Fijian population exceeded that of the *iTaukei* during the Second World War, which resulted in the *iTaukei* fearing the threat of the Indo-Fijians dominating Fijian politics. This fear was partly responsible for indigenous ethno-nationalism in modern Fijian politics. For many *iTaukei*, Indo-Fijian political control posed a threat to their identity and would be intolerable, and indigenous paramountcy must be maintained (Lal, 2016).

However, the Indo-Fijians see themselves as descendants of indentured labourers who were politically discriminated against. Indo-Fijians were the targets when political coups, which occurred in 1987 and 2000. The Indo-Fijian collective identity has been shaped to some degree by the suffering they endured since the colonial era, as well as the fact that they have been the main victims of political coups (Davies, 2005).

This ethnic division impedes the achievement of national unity because it has been a challenge for the two groups to share a national identity. It is important for multi-ethnic countries, like Fiji, to have a shared

national identity for social stability. One of the difficulties in forming a national Fijian identity was partly because of the manner in which the first Fijian Constitution, adopted in 1970, was conceptualised. Its aim was not to unify the multi-ethnic population but to create a political system based on distribution of political power based on separate representation, ironically, to avoid the risk of further ethnic conflict. As shown above, under the colonial rule, there were clear ethnic lines in Fiji, and each social group existed within different social settings. In some ways, the 1970 constitution helped to sustain these differences instead of creating a shared national identity. This impeded unity and emphasised differences between the two groups.

Various constitution in Fiji, except for the 2013 constitution, provided for various forms and degrees of ethnic and common representation. In all these cases, identity politics became an important norm in the electoral culture and politicians used ethnic mobilization as a means of electoral politicking. Thus, in some ways, elections in Fiji, intentionally or otherwise, served the purpose of further emphasising ethnic divisions. For example, in 2006, the indigenous Fijian political party, Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL), led by the former Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, won the general election by winning 36 seats, and the Fiji Labour Party (FLP), supported mostly by Indo-Fijians, won 31 seats. In this election, while SDL enjoyed more than 80% of the votes by the indigenous population, 83% of Indo-Fijians cast votes to FLP (Lal, 2007). Such a voting pattern clearly showed the prevalence of ethnicity in the Fijian voting pattern.

The coups of 1987 and 2000 also indicate the degree of ethnic tension within the Fijian society. These coups were conducted by indigenous nationalists when the Indo-Fijian-dominated political parties won elections. They felt that indigenous paramountcy was under threat. Although the 1987 coup did not escalate to serious violence, it evoked latent patriotic feelings among the iTaukei. After the 1987 coup, a variety of policies and strategies manifested the ongoing differences between the iTaukei and Indo-Fijians became tangible. For instance, affirmative action programs that prioritised development among the iTaukei were implemented to address ethnic equality but this was resented by Indo-Fijians who felt disadvantaged. The competition between the iTaukei and the Indo-Fijians continued in spheres such as employment, housing, and scholarship (Davies, 2005).

In the 2000 coup, there were some acts of violence against Indo-Fijians as well as members of the public generally across the country. There was social and political turmoil, involving unlawful incidents such as looting, burning of houses and Hindus temples, and alleged rape of Indian women carried out in the name of ethno-nationalism. As a result, a large number of Indo-Fijians left Fiji for Australia, New Zealand, and the US.

Both ethnic groups have devised narratives, which construct themselves as victims and their actions as defensive. The indigenous population believes that political power should be in their hands to balance the dominance of the economy by Indo-Fijians. On the contrary, the Indo-Fijians believe that they have been marginalised since their ancestors immigrated to Fiji. In short, both sides see themselves as victims, and this is one of factors, which shape differences and tension in Fiji. However, since he took over political control during the military coup in 2006, Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, the current Prime Minister of Fiji, began introducing policies to mitigate ethnic tensions and form a Fijian national identity. He has tried to do this by reconstructing a new narrative of multiculturalism, which he believes can be differentiated from past memories.

Two cases of memory construction

Memory construction and formation of national identity by political elite

In December 2006, Bainimarama, the then Commodore of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF), led a coup to remove the pro-iTaukei government, led by Laisenia Qarase. While the 1987 and 2000 coups were conducted because of the conflict between the two ethnic groups and arguments about who has the right to

control the country, the 2006 coup occurred because of the conflict between the RFMF and the Qarase government over political power. Bainimarama justified the coup by arguing that corruption in the Qarase administration had reached an unacceptable level. According to Bainimarama, the coup was a 'clean-up campaign'.

Since the 2006 coup, Bainimarama has repeatedly insisted that the nation must overcome its ethnic disputes and emphasised the need for a Fijian national identity shared by all ethnic groups. To this end, Bainimarama has tried to disseminate particular images of past ethnic relations. On many occasions, he has insisted that the social cleavages along ethnic lines have been created by 'old politicians'. For example, his speech at the United Nations General Assembly denounced past political elites for their promotion of ethnic divisions to preserve their vested interests. Bainimarama continued to insist that the 1987 and 2000 coups occurred as a result of the accumulation of elites' conservative behaviours. Bainimarama criticised the elites' wrongdoings, which wounded the feelings of Fijians and resulted in many people, mostly Indo-Fijians, leaving Fiji to escape such unequal living conditions. Bainimarama described it as 'one of the most shameful episodes of our history' (The Fijian Government, 2013). Such evaluations and interpretations of the past can be observed in many of his public speeches. In the speech at Tilak High School in July 2014, for example, Bainimarama explained that many Indo-Fijians left the country because of unfair treatment, adding that 'this exodus was a national tragedy' (The Fijian Government, 2014).

One of the features of Bainimarama's speeches is the dissemination of the message that although Fiji's history has been tragic, his government can overcome the tragedy. According to transcripts available on the Fijian government homepage, in the period between January 2013 and the September 2014 election, 47 of Bainimarama's speeches alluded to Fiji's past being unfortunate. The aim was to compare past governments with the current Bainimarama government in order to make an appeal for its legitimacy for the 2014 general election. In addition, in 2013, the Bainimarama administration issued the new Constitution, which was a big political event in Fiji. With the issuance of the new Constitution and the general election having made people's political awareness stronger, remarks by the charismatic politician received more attention than usual. In this period, he repeatedly articulated the discourse that Fiji's past had been unfortunate and unfair. Consequently, the recognition of the past as having been corrupted by elitism, which was the root cause of the 1987 and 2000 coups, was effectively spread across society.

Bainimarama's discourses and images of the past were effectively disseminated to the public by the local media, which were controlled by the Media Industry Development Decree. For example, *the Fiji Sun* is viewed as a 'cheerleader' of the Bainimarama government, and has contributed to Bainimarama's image building strategies by criticising opposition parties (Lal, 2016). In addition, there were cases of news anchors who broadcast news disadvantageous to the Bainimarama government being arrested. These cases made it difficult for the Fijian media to remain independent and play an active role in criticising the government (Robie, 2016).

Bainimarama's ambition can be explained by the theory of collective memory, which explains that dominant memories about a particular past event are widely disseminated to the public as a result of competition to win over other forms of memories. The dominant memories not only determine how members of society remember the past but also which memories they forget. In short, various memories are always in contestation with each other (Baines, 2007), and based on the social contexts, only the ones appropriate to the current elites who control society may survive and be stabilised. In this regard, those who have political power or are in a position of being able to control or propose societal needs and interests can construct and effectively impose collective memory. In addition, political elites can spread a specific perception of historical events among the public through the creation of textbooks and national commemoration projects about wars or past tragic events. This means that influence by states or political elites is strong in terms of constructing collective memory and forming collective identity.

However, Bainimarama's goal has not yet been accomplished. It is true that in the 2014 general election, the first national election since Bainimarama took over political power, there were some changes in ethnic-based

voting attitudes. In previous elections, people voted along ethnic lines due to the communal voting system. However, the new Constitution issued in 2013 abolished the communal voting system and stipulated a new election rule: the proportional representation system. Under the new voting system, individuals cast votes for individual candidates, which accumulate in favour of the political party to which each candidate belongs. Parliamentary seats are allocated to political parties based on the proportion of their total number of votes with a 5% threshold. Under the new electoral rule, FijiFirst Party, led by Bainimarama, won 32 seats with 59.2% of the total votes. The second was the Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA), the political party renamed from SDL, which won 15 seats with 28.2% of the total votes. The third party was the National Federation Party, supported mostly by the Indo-Fijians, which won 3 seats with 5.5% of the total votes (Fijian Elections Office). In general, FijiFirst gained more votes in Indo-Fijian-majority areas, and SODELPA gained more votes in iTaukei-majority areas. However, FijiFirst's percentage of votes obtained exceeded the Indo-Fijian population ratio in all 14 provinces, and conversely, SODELPA's percentage of votes obtained was below the iTaukei population ratio in all 14 provinces (Fraenkel, 2015). This result indicates that FijiFirst was successful in obtaining certain numbers of indigenous votes in all provinces. As FijiFirst was widely supported by Indo-Fijians because of its stance against the previous pro-iTaukei government, how FijiFirst and SODELPA would fight to gain indigenous votes was the centre of public attention (Ratuva, 2016). The result of the election was that indigenous votes were split almost 50:50 between FijiFirst and SODELPA.

The 2014 election saw the possibility that Fiji had begun to vote along non-ethnic lines, although we have to bear in mind that there should be more than one factor contributing to changes in voting attitudes, such as Bainimarama's economic policy and infrastructure projects, which attracted many rural indigenous people. However, in the 2018 general election, the voting attitude once again showed an ethnicity-based tendency. Although Bainimarama's FijiFirst won the 2018 election, it gained 50.02% of the total votes, a decrease from almost 60% in the 2014 election. Conversely, SODELPA increased its gain from 28.2% in 2014 to 39.85% in 2018. Since SODELPA is pro-iTaukei and its manifesto listed a number of policies to secure indigenous rights, many iTaukei voters changed their choice from FijiFirst to SODELPA. However, it is believed that the majority of Indo-Fijians still cast their votes for FijiFirst. Although a large number of iTaukei still support FijiFirst, the numbers are declining compared with the 2014 election. Therefore, the Fijian voting attitude seems to have gone back to its ethnic bent. Many commentators and experts argue that Fijian ethnic tension still remains (For example, see; Graue, 2018; Wyeth, 2017).

Memory of Syria shipwreck and ethnic harmonisation

The other case of memory construction in Fiji concerns the *Syria* shipwreck. On 13 March 1884, the ship *Syria* sailed from Calcutta, carrying 497 Indian indentured labourers and their families and 43 crew members to Fiji. At 8:30pm on 11 May, *Syria* was aground on the Nasilai Reef located east of Viti Levu, resulting in the loss of 59 lives. This shipwreck has been recognised as one of the worst maritime accidents in Fiji's history. In 1983, monuments were built at Syria Park in Nausori to immortalise the tragic history of the first generation of Indian immigrants. The most recent landmark was the descendants of survivors of the *Syria* shipwreck being recognised as 'Iuvendra na Ratu', or 'children of the chief', by the village of Rewa. As the first time people of Indian origin were formally recognised in Fijian traditional customs, this was a historic event (The University of the South Pacific, 2019). This news has received much attention from Fijians across the country as it can serve as a good example of how to facilitate harmonisation between the two ethnic groups.

We can observe some changes of how to describe the response by local indigenous Fijians to the maritime accident. The official record about the shipwreck made by the colonial administration described Dr. William McGregor, Chief Medical Officer of the colonial government, organising teams that led to the rescue of most of the Indian indentured labourers. The report written by McGregor himself depicted how tragic the accident was, how they organised the rescue team, and how they saved hundreds of Indians.

The tragic event, however, has been forgotten until Brij Lal wrote detailed stories about it in 1979 (Lal, 1979). Lal acknowledged the tremendous efforts by McGregor to save many Indians from drowning. For example, Lal concluded that “The loss of life would have been much greater but for the perseverance and courage of the rescue crew, especially its leader, Dr William MacGregor” (Lal, 1979: 35).

However, Chand (2017) argues that the report by McGregor is severely biased, and after scrutinising non-official documents and testimonies, it was found that local Fijians went to the Indians’ rescue 30 hours prior to the arrival of the official team. However, such stories had long been hidden from the public, and therefore, Chand argues that a negative image of the iTaukei had been widely spread among Indo-Fijians, straining the relationship between the two groups during and after colonisation.

It is true that McGregor reported that some indigenous Fijians tried to loot the wrecked ship, but at the same time, he emphasised the contribution of local Fijians to save many Indians and recommended that some Fijian were worthy recipients of rewards. (McGregor, 2016). In addition, McGregor introduced local Fijians who rendered generous support for the Indian survivors. For example, he reported that “... the native received the Indians as they marched across with great kindness, and cordiality, presenting them with food and fruit in the most warm and generous manner...” (McGregor, 2016: 153).

Although McGregor admitted and introduced the contribution of iTaukei to the rescue activities, the question one needs asking is why Chand criticises McGregor’s report as a biased one, which contributed to negative ethnic relations between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians? Chand argues that efforts and contributions of local indigenous Fijians were not well recognised, and conversely, it exaggerated the colonial government’s contribution. In short, Chand aims to emphasise the contribution of indigenous Fijians, which is different from the description made by McGregor and Lal, because they mainly emphasised the contribution of colonial government, and focused particularly on efforts by McGregor. Therefore, discourse about *Syria* shipwreck has been changing from the one emphasising the colonial government’s contribution to the one emphasising iTaukei’s contribution.

To evaluate whether Chand’s argument is correct or not is not a scope of this article, but to analyse the shift in the narrative, which pays more attention to positive aspects of iTaukei involvement in the *Syria* shipwreck, is a central concern. People have now recognised that iTaukei’s rescue of and support for Indian migrants would have contributed to relations between the two ethnic groups, which ‘have usually been good’ and ‘harmonious for a long time’ (Hill, 2017). In addition, New Zealand-based NGO, Fiji Girit Foundation NZ, which acts for preserving Indo-Fijian identity by disseminating the Indo-Fijian history, has commemorated the loss of the 59 lives and shown collective gratitude to the local Fijians who risked their lives to save their ancestors. Fiji Girit Foundation NZ holds commemorative events such as visits to Nasilai village, where the *Syria* was wrecked. Its activities to honour brave local Fijians, in which some politicians were also involved, were covered by the local media. As a result, this NGO has played an important role in disseminating the positive images about iTaukei.

Analysing the two cases at once

The previous section introduced two seemingly different cases of memory construction. The first was a charismatic politician’s attempt to disseminate a certain image of ethnic relations in order to develop the Fijian national identity. The second case was of the attempt to alter memory about the *Syria* shipwreck. This paper argues, however, that the two cases are interlinked, and the processes of memory construction and their influence on society should be analysed together owing to the strong influence of globalisation and development of digital technology.

The classical understanding of collective memory is that any memory individuals possess belongs to a particular social group, and each social group develops its own collective memory. However, in this era of

globalisation, people can easily move from one place to another, bringing memories developed in their original communities to other societies, leading to modifications in the original memories because of the influences of the new societies. At the same time, one's memory can affect the collective memory of the new society, which absorbs new ideas. Owing to how rapidly memory can be mobilised, there are numerous opportunities for inter-communal interaction; therefore, in this era of globalisation, societies cannot produce memories that are isolated from other social contexts.

This tendency has been further intensified through developments in information technology. The previous theoretical understanding of memory dissemination was that social contexts were mediated by traditional media, social practices, and historical sites. In the digital age, however, individuals can also easily disseminate the ideas of one society to others through social networking service (SNS), blogs, and posting movies on websites. By using digital technology, people do not have to be physically present to be involved in a society. Furthermore, not only can individuals disseminate new ideas to different societies but also construct new memories. For example, a famous singer's passionate appeals about women's rights posted on SNS may have a big impact on the ideas of women's rights across countries. This famous personality can introduce memories about how women have been marginalised in male-dominated societies, and these can instantly be widely disseminated all over the world. To put it another way, in the age of digitisation, people are not only mediators in but also active creators of new collective memory.

The nature of collective memory in this globalised era has led to criticism of the classical understanding of collective memory. Against this backdrop, Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen (2017) argue that memory studies has entered a new era, in line with which scholars must develop newer theories and approaches. In the present day and age, memory is neither confined to specific sites nor does it belong to specific social groups. Rather, memory in the current world is more fluid, easily crossing the borders of social groups. Therefore, we have to recognise that memory is not a product of the society but a process of transformation. This, of course, does not mean that the classical understanding of memory is completely outmoded. Commemoration, storytelling, and political speeches all still have a big impact on the formation of the past. However, particular sites and activities storing past memories become unprecedentedly complex, and it becomes more difficult to predict what memory the society will have.

This is why Bainimarama's goal cannot be accomplished. Ethnic collective memory and national identity are the outcomes of the interaction of numerous variables, and which memory and identity the nation retains depends hugely on social contexts and environments. Therefore, it is incorrect to think that political elites can easily control citizens' memories. Conversely, however, the changing nature of society allows international actors to have a strong influence on the process of memory construction at local level. Fiji Girit Foundation NZ, for example, is an NGO based in New Zealand, but works for preserving the Indo-Fijian identity. Since a number of Indo-Fijians immigrated to New Zealand, Indo-Fijian's memory has not only been transplanted in New Zealand but also been developed by interacting with social contexts in New Zealand. In addition, the new Indo-Fijian's collective memory developed in New Zealand has been exported to Fiji through New Zealand-based activists, such as Fiji Girit Foundation NZ. Furthermore, this NGO created Facebook page and disseminate information worldwide in order to make awareness of the identity of Indo-Fijians, which may have assisted in interacting the new collective memory developed in New Zealand with Fijian people.

In the globalised and digitalised era, it is quite difficult to predict which direction the memory of a group will take. Politicians cannot fully control the memory of its people. An NGO may have a strong influence on altering collective memory in other countries. To handle the dramatic change in the nature of societies brought on by globalisation and digitisation, scholars must develop an appropriate theory of memory, which provides an analytical framework that allows the examination of as many factors as necessary. Not only should different social groups be included in the analysis but the influences and beliefs of other cultures, generations, religions, and so on also have to be considered variables in the formation of collective memory. They are all interdependent, and memory is stabilised as a result of the interactions of numerous variables.

Therefore, it is unwise to separate Bainimarama's attempt at memory construction from the attempt to alter the memory of the response by local indigenous Fijians to the *Syria* shipwreck. Instead, as they have affected each other, they must be analysed simultaneously.

A number of political and social events, such as coups, have been associated with Fiji's deep ethnic divisions. However, whatever the cause, many believe that the situation has to be resolved and that there is an urgent need to achieve reconciliation between the two ethnic groups. Groups seeking the mitigation of ethnic tension have used the *Syria* shipwreck as a symbol of ethnic harmonisation, not paying much attention to the efforts by the colonial government. For example, Fiji Girit Foundation NZ shows gratitude to indigenous Fijians in Nasilai village for their efforts to save Indians, but little to no gratitude to the colonial government, which also saved many Indian lives.

An important factor when promoting ethnic harmonisation is to have a consensus about how to recognise, interpret, and evaluate the past ethnic conflicts. Some groups of people started to argue that a major cause of ethnic tension was colonialism, and therefore, the relationship between iTaukei and Indo-Fijian was not naturally bad. A number of NGO documents, political speeches, and blogs nowadays emphasise the negative impacts of colonialism on the ethnic relations in Fiji. For example, Bainimarama argued in his speech for the 140th remembrance day for the Indian indentured labourers that local indigenous Fijians extended "fraternal hand of friendship, offering support when they witnessed the beatings that were being carried out" to Indians, and it was the colonial government who banned the support for Indian workers (The Fijian Government, 2019). Then, Bainimarama argues that,

This instilled fear among the villagers that they would be punished, it forced them to change their perspective; instead of looking at the girmitya [Indian indentured workers] as fellow humans who deserved help, after the crackdown, they were seen as "outsiders". The colonisers created and enforced a divide between the girmitya and indigenous populations – the consequences of which are still in some corners of Fijian politics today.

The same situation was observed in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide. Rwandan government concluded that the root cause of the genocide can be found in colonial policies that created cleavages between Hutu and Tutsi (Hilker, 2009). These narratives are linked to attempts to change collective memory from the one focusing on the rescue by colonial administration to the one paying more attention to local Fijians. This reflects an embedded desire for ethnic harmonisation.

Therefore, although Bainimarama's attempt to form a national identity through the construction of a particular image of the past ethnic confrontation did not seem to succeed, his discourse may have assisted the social needs for resolving the ethnic division to move forward. At the same time, however, as Bainimarama's story identifies opposition politicians as the country's enemies, it may further deepen the cleavages between the conservative iTaukei population and the rest of the society. In short, Bainimarama's strategy may have a positive impact on furthering ethnic harmonisation at one level, while at another level it could contribute to deepening ethnic cleavages. To analyse the *Syria* shipwreck in the context of ethnic harmonisation, the impacts of Bainimarama's political narratives cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

The above argument should be further explored by empirical research. However, as theoretical development reveals, our collective memories in the 21st century are more context-driven than previously, and social contexts have become much more complex and fluid. In particular, digital media, which reaches a vast audience, has to be paid attention. Social contexts from various societies affect one another, as demonstrated by Fiji Girit Foundation NZ. Bainimarama's discourse may have encouraged people to look at the more

positive aspects of Fijian history, realising that ethnic relations between the iTaukei and Indo-Fijians have actually not been so bad. However, at the same time, we have to bear in mind that Bainimarama's political performance may have negative effects.

To tackle these complex situations, memory studies must take an interdisciplinary approach. Only one area of study, be it sociology, anthropology, or history, cannot deal with such a complex social situation. We have to merge different disciplines, from sociology, political sciences, and art to media studies, psychology, and neurosciences in order to grasp the complete picture of society. This is why interdisciplinary research activities on memory studies have recently been developed.

Memory sharing is important for divided societies to develop national identities and mitigate ethnic tensions. Previous studies on collective memory tend to focus on the process of memory construction or memory engineering and how manmade memories are distributed to the public. However, predicting the destination of our memories has become a much harder task. As the case of the *Syria* shipwreck indicates, memory can nurture a sense of closeness and aid in ethnic harmonisation. In order to continue such a positive social trend, we have to determine how such memory has been constructed and under what social contexts. Determining the mechanism of how memory is constructed in this complex globalised and digitised world gives us a practical idea of what kind of social environment divided societies need to create for memory sharing and ethnic harmonisation. As a part of this effort, this paper proposes that events in different contexts be analysed within a single framework. This analytical approach will contribute to revealing the hidden mechanisms of the harmonisation process resulting from the *Syria* shipwreck memory.

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