

ABSTRACT

Title

***Vanua* Tourism: Are Culture and Tradition Influencing the Success of Indigenous Community Owned Backpacker Operations in Fiji?**

Keywords: Community based tourism, backpacker, budget, small medium tourism enterprises, indigenous tourism, *vanua* tourism, traditional cultural obligations, Yasawas, Fiji, training.

Introduction

In the past ten years Fiji has experienced a significant increase in tourist arrivals from the budget backpacker and GAP youth and Career GAP segments on round-the-world extended holidays. This has led to the phenomenal growth of indigenous owned budget backpacker accommodation especially in the Yasawa and Mamanuca Island Groups. Indigenous owned businesses in Fiji and the South Pacific like many elsewhere, have a high failure rate, and whilst many of their reasons for failure may be the same as their western counterparts, there could be reasons that are culture specific.

Although it is widely agreed that culture has a significant impact on the behaviour of entrepreneurs, studies of the impact of culture on entrepreneurs have been few. A further factor to consider is how indigenous expectations and traditional obligations impact on the successful operation of these businesses. Many studies in developing countries and Fiji specifically claim the failure of indigenous peoples to run successful SMTEs, but there has been little research that considers both business and cultural factors and links this to the training needed to empower these communities to deliver high quality services. This paper discusses the challenges faced by two community owned backpacker resorts in the Yasawa Islands in Fiji: Wayalilai Ecohaven Resort and Naqalia Lodge by examining what indigenous operators and communities expect from their businesses and identified how these differ from their western counterparts.

Method

An ethnographic study of two small/medium tourism enterprises in the Yasawas. The researcher spent six months in 2009 living at the two resorts on the island of Wayalilai and in Namara village, home to the five clans (*mataqali*) that own the two resorts, and visited the resorts for periods of one to two weeks between 2008 and 2010. Multiple research methods included: a narrative-based interpretation of daily events; focus interviews, self administered questionnaires to management, staff, tourists and clan members, and an analysis of company records. As a Fiji citizen of mixed race (*kailoma*) the researcher has an excellent

understanding of indigenous Fijian culture and through her relationship with the clans as Rusiate's (the manager of Naqalia Lodge) '*qase ni vuli*' (teacher) she was given unlimited access to both case studies, guests and clan members.

Findings

A major dilemma facing Fijian *i-taukei* entrepreneurs is how to maintain a balance between good business practice, profit maximisation and fulfilling social and communal obligations. Since entrepreneurs rely on local communities for labour, access to land, marine resources and support, failure to accept traditional societal obligations can lead to alienation and social ostracism. The managers of both resorts are accountable to the community. They are continually faced with balancing their financial revenue and expenses with requests from the community or their Chiefs for funds or resources (which can include labour) to fulfil cultural obligations. As long as funds for these obligations are available the resorts are considered to be successful.

Profit maximisation is not the highest priority especially where clans have a responsibility to contribute to traditional obligations (*oga vakavanua*). These obligations are important to communities. Failure to meet these responsibilities can bring about a feeling of *madua* for all concerned. *Madua* is a feeling of shame and guilt and an emotional burden felt by indigenous Fijians when they are unable to fulfil their traditional/societal obligations. This feeling is strongly related to the *kerekere* system of borrowing from kinsmen, without repaying, that exists within Fijian communities. When someone is asked a 'favour' by a member of their community, it is virtually impossible to refuse. There are two traditional borrowing systems in Fiji – the *kerekere* system which is never repaid; and the *dinau* system which is a form of time payment. These systems can pose difficulties to the successful management of Fijian businesses due to an inability to separate business and personal spending, but this is not always the case. For the two resorts, and especially Naqalia, in many circumstances the *kerekere* system has worked very well.

Another cultural factor in these community owned businesses is the respect and power accorded a Chief or Head of the Clan. If the Chief tells the manager to carry out a certain action she/he is duty bound to do this. A direct command of a Chief (*vaka tu lewa ni turaga*) cannot be disobeyed or questioned. This can mean that payments for outstanding expenses are deferred to fulfil the command. Such commands can have serious consequences for financial management and cash flow. A way must be found to provide communities with the training and knowledge which includes the development of a culturally acceptable system that allows traditional obligations to be met without draining business resources.

Conclusion

The behaviour of indigenous entrepreneurs should be considered in the context of traditional community expectations, and not necessarily in accordance with western concepts of entrepreneurial individualism. As entrepreneurs are representatives of their clan, success should not be solely measured on financial or economic terms. It should also be measured on their ability to balance traditional and business obligations, and maintain their status within local society. For these businesses to succeed, culturally accepted limits should be put on social obligations, thus enabling entrepreneurs to meet social and cultural obligations. Also, for training to be relevant it should be tailor-made to incorporate traditional culture into modern business practices. Suitably designed training should enable entrepreneurs to be more flexible and include tools that allow entrepreneurs to meet traditional demands and business goals. Through development educational workshops that include clan members and elders, a culturally acceptable system could evolve that enabled the fulfilment of traditional obligations without draining business resources.

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Social Science disciplines used

- Management science
- Cultural studies
- Development studies

Author details:

Dawn Gibson BA *S. Pac*, PGDipTS *S.Pac*, PGCert ODE, *OU*, MA T&H *S.Pac*

Lecturer Tourism and Hospitality

School of Tourism and Hospitality Management

Faculty of Business and Economics

The University of the South Pacific

Suva, Fiji Islands

Email: gibson_d@usp.ac.fj

Telephone: (679) 323 2814