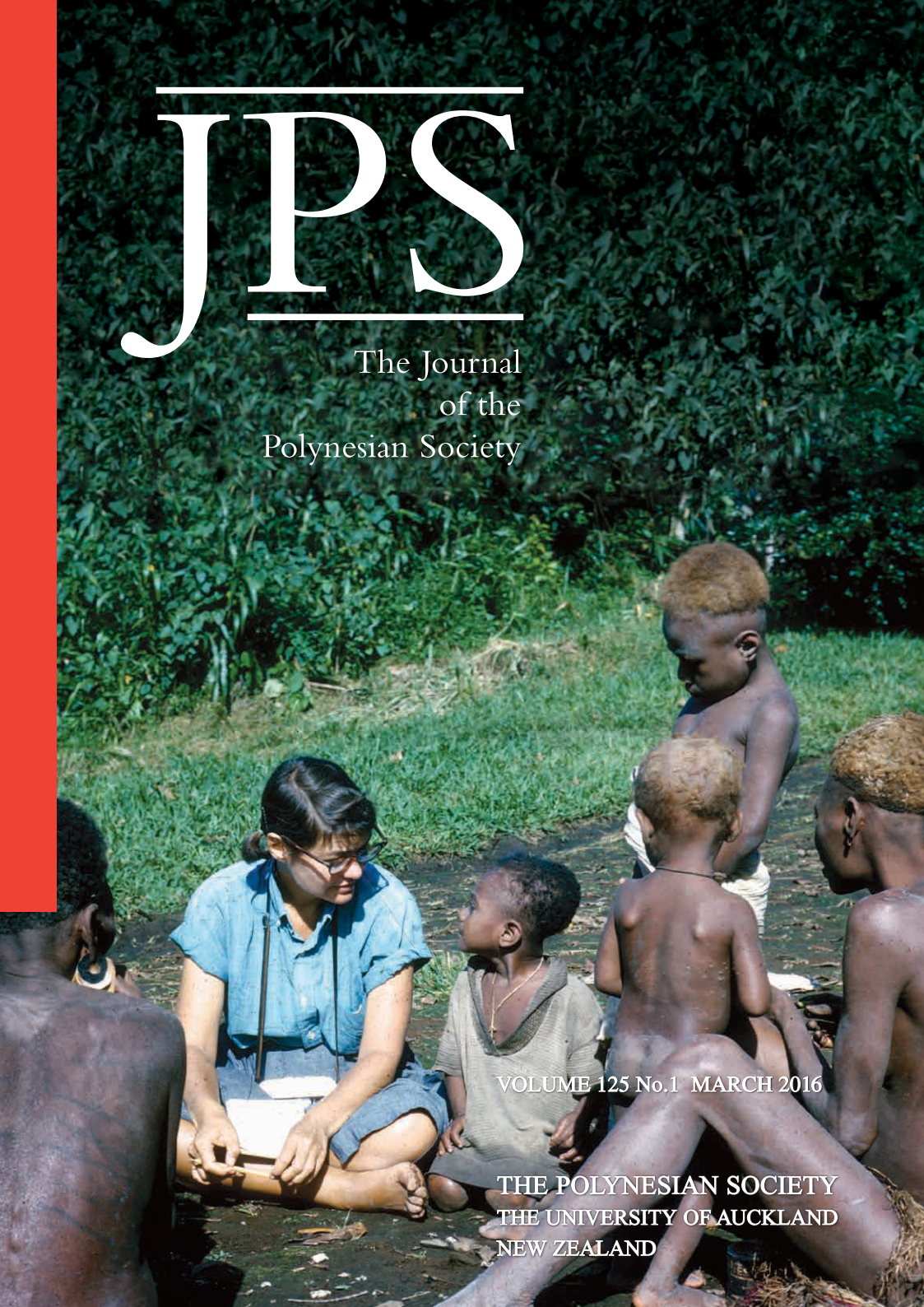


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LITTLE PEOPLE, GHOSTS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE GOOD

MATT TOMLINSON
Australian National University

Although ghosts might not be found universally, as Laura Bohannon observed in her classic article on the Tiv of West Africa (Bohannon 1966), they are undeniably popular. As embodied figures of culturally contoured anxieties about death experiences, ghosts tend to make excellent subjects for stories. Narratively, they spring to life, whether doing so as alternative forms of kin (Kwon 2008), patrollers of boundaries (Taylor 2014), voices of political truth and legitimacy (Greenblatt 1999), figures of tragedy who paradoxically offer good fortune (Ferguson 2014) or any other of the seemingly countless characterisations found in the ethnographic literature.

In this article I analyse stories about ghosts ‘*yalo*’ in Fiji and compare them with elusive dwarf spirits known as *veli*, to see what critical insights can be gained by aligning these distinct figures. In doing so, I am trying to avoid the Scylla of explaining them away as delusions and the Charybdis of throwing them into the overly expansive category of “haunting”, a category which, under the influence of Derridean “hauntology” (Derrida 1994), has attempted to encompass such sprawling, ungraspable referents as the “seething presence” of “that which appears to be not there” (Gordon 1997: 8). As Heonik Kwon has cautioned for ghosts, it is crucial to distinguish between the way they are “concrete historical identities” and the way they are “idea[s] of history” (Kwon 2008: 2). Ghosts and *veli* can be both things, but keeping the categories analytically separate helps avoid the loose excess of turning them into tokens of an indefinable, seething haunting.

In analysing the similarities and differences between ghosts and *veli* as figures in history and figures of history, I draw on the recent work of Joel Robbins (2013) on suffering and hope. Robbins has proposed an “anthropology of the good” that treats difference in terms of promise rather than trauma, and this article is an attempt to work through the implications of Robbins’ framework. Robbins focusses on anthropological paradigms, not things that go bump in the night; but those things that go bump in the night, in Fiji at least, do tend to arrange themselves along the lines Robbins draws. Keeping ghosts and dwarf spirits together in the same analytical frame reveals them as complementary alternative perspectives in imagining and engaging with pasts and futures.

PRELUDE

In December 1998, during dissertation fieldwork on Kadavu Island, Fiji, I heard my first local ghost story. It was told at a *kava*-drinking session in Nagonedau village, *kava* or *yaqona* (in Fijian) being a relaxing drink made from the dried and crushed roots and stems of *Piper methysticum* infused into water. It concerned a man named Manoa, who had died not long before—he had been alive when I first visited Kadavu in 1996—but he was not the ghost. Rather, the ghost appeared to him, as Ratu Alipate Naivolivoli from Nagonedau Village explained to me. I reported in my fieldnotes:

Apparently Manoa was helping [to] work on the new *vale ni bose* [meeting hall] a few years ago when he found a bone and just tossed it aside. That night, he looked and saw standing in his window a *turaga* [polite word for a man, often translated as “chief”] (this was the word [Ratu Naivolivoli] used); the *turaga* held up his hand and there was a finger missing—the thumb, I think. Manoa was frightened and the next morning told [Ratu] Vitu, so they went and found the bone and buried it at one of the house’s corner posts—where, I gather, the rest of the body had been buried. (December 3, 1998; Notebook A, p. 166)¹

Two months after hearing this tale, I was drinking *kava* at the house of Ratu Aca Vitukawalu (the “Ratu Vitu” of the story) in Tavuki Village, which is next to Nagonedau. I asked him about it. He confirmed that the ghost’s missing digit had been a thumb, and added three details. First, Manoa had been so frightened that he went to Ratu Vitu’s house in the middle of the night—at 2 or 3 in the morning—and slept there. Second, the ghost was physically big, and had big hair, befitting the figure of a powerful man from the old days. Third, when I asked whether Manoa had seen the figure for a short time or a long time, Ratu Vitu said that it was a long time. When I asked him and another young man from Tavuki if they knew any other local ghost stories, they said no (February 6, 1999; Notebook B, pp. 54-55).

This story about the thumbless ghost is generic. It even has its own folklore motif index number in Stith Thompson’s (1955-1958) monograph series on folklore literature (E235.4.3, “Return from dead to punish theft of bone from grave”, vol. 2). But it is also distinctively Fijian: the man was obviously a ghost not only because he came for that discarded bone, but also because with his size and hairstyle he evidently came from the local past (see also Herr 1981: 340).² Like any good ghost story, it was creepy and memorable, and I heard it mentioned during a later round of fieldwork in January 2006.

On that later occasion, I was drinking *kava* in Nagonedau Village with Ratu Alipate’s older brothers, Ratu Josaia Veibataki and Ratu Laisiasa Cadri. Early in the *kava* session, Ratu Jo and Ratu Cadri told me about the *veli*, or dwarf spirits. Although I enjoyed hearing about them, I also wanted to hear

about ghosts, so I changed the topic. We discussed the story of Manoa and the thumbless ghost. Then Ratu Cadri told me a firsthand ghost tale of his own which took place in Vunisea, Kadavu Island's town and administrative centre. Below, I relate that story as well as what the brothers told me about *veli*.

Looking back, I am keenly embarrassed that I committed the ethnographer's sin of knocking a good conversation off course. Why, when my friends wanted to talk about *veli*, did I bring up ghosts, who seem to be entirely different characters? As it turned out, the brothers did not seem to mind changing the subject, and after a while a man from another village showed up and held forth on political topics, so the fun discussion was then truly over. My old clumsiness, however, motivates a new question. Is it possible to learn something unexpected by putting ghosts and *veli* into the same analytical frame? At the Nagonedau *kava* session they were brought into the same frame owing to my methodological recklessness and unexamined presuppositions. But if one proceeds more carefully, attempting to sort out dwarf spirits and ghosts in a non-reductive way, then bringing them back together to clarify how they relate to each other, it might be possible to gain fresh insights about moral-historical imaginations in Fiji, and perhaps elsewhere as well.

LITTLE PEOPLE

Many Pacific Islands societies feature small, elusive, long-haired and immensely strong quasi-human spiritual figures (see Forth 2008: 242-59 for a survey). For example, Sāmoa has legendary cave-dwelling ones. A story about them, centred on the village of Paia on Savai'i, tells how a man who discovered them was magically prosperous as long as he did not reveal their existence to others (Vaelua 1998–1999: 129-35). In the story's most telling line, as given in English translation, the man wondered "if they were human or spirit" (p. 130).³

Some of the most well-known Oceanic little people are Hawai'i's *menehune*, said to be ancestral beings, essentially human and kin to living humans. Indeed, during the rule of Kaumuali'i of Kaua'i (d. 1824), a census listed 65 people in the Wainiha Valley who were classified as *menehune* (Luomala 1951: 12). They were small, "known to be powerfully built, stout and muscular. Their skin was red, their body hairy; their nose short and thick-set and their low, protruding forehead was covered with hair. They had big eyes hidden by long eyebrows, and their set countenance was fearful so that they were unpleasant to look upon" (Thrum 1923: 214). Despite their frightening gaze, "they were not angry or quarrelsome men, said my [interlocutor's] ancestors, who learned clearly of their characteristics" (Thrum 1923: 218). Carlos Andrade, working from Hawaiian language sources, suggests that "The physical shrinking of Menehune in stories written in historic times by foreign

writers may have more to do with Westerners' imaginations than with the actual physical stature of these people", and he notes how they have come, in some modern popular imaginings, to resemble European leprechauns, fairies and elves (Andrade 2008: 6, 9; see also Luomala 1951: 19, who suggests that the images of *menehune* on mid-20th century tourist maps were "inspired by Scandinavian trolls"). But *menehune* also can have an aura of danger. In the mid-1940s, a 14-year old girl of mixed Hawaiian and Chinese ancestry told the schoolteacher Gwladys Hughes about them: "Menehunes are something like small dwarfs. Most people say that one menehune has the strength of fifty men. The olden Hawaiians say that if someone else comes from another island, if he don't be careful, this thing will harm them" (Hughes 1949: 306).

Another kind of Oceanic little person is the *kakamora* of Solomon Islands, described vividly for Makira Island by Michael W. Scott in several publications (Scott 2007, 2008, 2013, 2014a, 2014b). Central to Scott's scholarship is the analysis of cosmologies in terms of monogenetic or polygenetic foundations: that is, do people describe the world, and themselves in the world, as fundamentally unified in origins or as fundamentally separated? Answering this question requires, in part, analysis of who *kakamora* are and what they signify.

Many Makirans believe that their island has been hollowed out. Living inside it, underground, is a fantastical army aided by the *kakamora* that will emerge one day to re-establish true *kastom* 'traditional ways'. The dwarfish *kakamora* spirits, considered to be "proto-people" (Scott 2008)—ancestral but co-present with us; ingredient to humanity but markedly different from it—are said to retain the old language and true *kastom* of Makira while helping the underground army develop "advanced, even paranormal, technology" (Scott 2013: 56). Different Christian congregations, predictably, come to different conclusions as to whether their ascendance will be a good thing or a bad thing.

Kakamora are "human-like but very short, with long flowing hair growing from their heads, long fingernails and glowing eyes" (Scott 2014a: 74). They are tremendously strong: when the island was about to crash into the sea, legend has it they propped up a limestone pillar to save it. However, they do not always help humans. Because they cannot make fire, they sometimes steal it from people, and they also steal children. Their magical power is inherent, but also detachable, concentrated in stones they keep in one of their armpits. These stones can be removed and used by those who are knowledgeable.

In Scott's inspired analysis, the key to understanding *kakamora* is that they embody the idea of Makira as a place and a collectivity. They are part of the earth, living in caves, carving out the underground, carrying magic stones in their armpits. They carry and express Makira's perfect past and future potential or, as Scott puts it, they serve as "conceptually available figures of the primordial wholeness and essential power of Makira" (2013: 59). Their

miniaturised wholeness and power makes *kakamora* both admirable and monstrous. They are admirable because they can restore Makira; they are monstrous because they lurk out of sight while embodying power's danger as well as its promise. Indeed, for evangelical Christians like two Seventh-day Adventists whose theology Scott discusses at length (2013), the *kakamora*'s underground space is "Satan's base in the Pacific".

Fiji's own long-haired dwarf spirits, the *veli*, resemble other Oceanic little people. They are physically and magically powerful, admired but sometimes dangerous. Clunie and Ligairi (1983: 55) call the *veli* "a species of rustic and decidedly contrary gnome who still haunts the Fiji bush"; making them cuter, Nabobo-Baba (2006: 58) translates "*veli*" as "elves", and also notes that they "live in the forests" (2006: 59, note 11). She observes that *veli* are people's relatives—they "are considered relations" and "are deemed to influence the behaviour of people in certain clans"—but are also "opposite to human beings. For example, when things are hot, they feel cold and *vice versa*" (2006: 59, note 11).

In the early 1860s, the botanist Berthold Seemann reported that "In Kuruduadua's domain [Namosi] I could hardly turn without hearing of the doings of the *Veli*" (Seemann 1862: 204). He described them as gnomish, light-skinned and living in hollowed-out trees, adding, curiously, "Some have wings, others have not" (p. 204). In the same decade, the Methodist missionary Jesse Carey surveyed his "native teachers" in Kadavu about local traditions, practices and beliefs, and received some information about *veli*. One of the respondents characterised them as being very short, living in hills and cracks in rocks as well as the hollows of trees, and having habits or customs (*itovo*) like those of humans (Carey 1865: 176). Carey's survey also obtained lyrics to a *meke* 'traditional chant with dance' about *veli*. "It is said that a *veli* was baked in an earth oven," the author explained; "when the oven was covered and bamboo was cut to dig it up, the *veli* had fled, and did a *meke*, its *meke* went like this":

The cut bamboo, *roko lele*
 Whose bamboo, *roko lele*
 The bamboo of the Dwarf, *roko lele*
 Cutting the liver, *roko lele*
 The flesh/substance has fled, *roko lele* (Carey 1865: 217)⁴

As I describe below, *veli* are associated with earth ovens because they are also associated with ritual firewalking: they combine earth and fire. In the *meke* lyrics, the *veli*'s special talents help it to escape from inside the oven.⁵

A later description of *veli* comes from the colonial official Adolph Brewster:

The natives of my time used to maintain that the forests and waste spaces were still inhabited by a dwarf or pygmy people, visible only to the faithful, handsome little folk with large fuzzy mops of hair, miniatures of what their own were like until they were cropped in deference to the sanitary requirements of the Wesleyan missionaries.

These little sylvan creatures were called *veli* and took the place of our own fairies. They loved the woods, the open grasslands and the sparkling brooks, and dwelt in hollow trees, caves and dugouts. They had their own bananas, *kava* and other wild plants from which the varieties now in cultivation have been evolved. (Brewster 1922: 88)

The descriptions offered by Seemann, Carey and Brewster harmonise, but whereas Brewster was ready to consign *veli* to the past, my own experience at the *kava*-drinking session in Nagonedau Village in January 2006—as well as the accounts of Nabobo-Baba, Clunie and Ligairi, Daryl Tarte (Tarte 2014: 171-75) and Guido Carlo Pigliasco (see below)—make it clear that *veli* thrive in the present. A key point about *veli* is that they are still here. As I wrote in my fieldnotes:

[Ratu Jo and Ratu Cadri] were telling stories of *veli*, the invisible dwarf spirits. If a large boat is ashore and people want it to be dragged to the sea, the *bete* [traditional priest] who serves the *veli* can do so single-handedly because he is aided by all his invisible dwarfish helpers. The *veli* also protect the Beqa firewalkers by lying (invisibly) on the hot stones[.] If you're building a [n] *irevo* [earth oven], don't joke about firewalking across it, or the *veli* will hear you, lie on the hot stones, and consequently your food will not get cooked. But if you've made this joke and want to negate the effects, toss a coconut in the earth oven, for the coconut is the *velis'* food. It's clear that Rt Jo and Rt Cadri firmly believe in their existence and think of them as adorable benevolent spirits. (January 23, 2006; Notebook E1, pp. 41-42)⁶

These descriptions of *veli* as a multitude of small but powerful quasi-human spirits with magical qualities resonate with the descriptions of other little people in the Pacific discussed above. Like those other figures, the *veli* also have their dangerous aspects, as suggested by Clunie and Ligairi's description of them as “decidedly contrary”.

Their dangerous contrariness is evident in a story heard by Guido Carlo Pigliasco during his research in Beqa. The story was about a man asked by his chief to plant coconut palms in order to mark a boundary. He did so. “[B]ut the *veli*,” Pigliasco writes (in contrast to Ratu Jo and Ratu Cadri), “... notoriously dislike coconuts” because they can choke on them, and so they “‘punished’ him”. The man began suffering from cancer of the mouth and

jaw, and then died (2007: 213-14; see also Pigliasco 2009, 2012). Similarly, Seemann's account from the 1860s reports, "They are friendly disposed, and possess no other bad quality than that of stealing iron tools from the natives", but then added that men who have cut down their favourite fruit trees "have received a sound beating from the enraged *veli*" (Seemann 1862: 204-5). Putting together the various portraits then, *veli* can be seen as short, powerful, playful, mischievous and admirable, but also potentially dangerous. These are charming little people who can kill you.⁷

In the context of Christian Fiji, the past is a battlefield of competing evaluations: it was a time of strength, but also sin; a time of integrity, but also war. In this regard, recall Brewster's description of *veli* with "large fuzzy mops of hair" which, he noted, were what many Fijians' hairstyles looked like in the days before Christianity (Brewster 1922: 88, cf. Seemann 1862: 204). In addition, Pigliasco notes that in Beqa, *veli* are always male, which aligns masculinity with power, the past and the land.⁸ In short, *veli* are a condensed image of the Fijian *vanua* 'the land', which is itself integrally composed of people serving chiefs.

Sorting out the relationships between Christianity and the land is a dominant project in much of indigenous Fiji. In many parts of Fiji, the Methodists and Catholics who enjoy talking about tradition find themselves on the defensive against evangelical and Pentecostal Christian groups who demonise tradition and treat the landscape, and its bones and spirits, as things that need to be cleaned up (Newland 2004, Tomlinson 2009). Thus *veli*, like the ghosts I will soon discuss, must be seen in the context of modern Fijian Christianity in which the landscape is saturated with competing meanings and values. Land is God's gift to indigenous Fijian Christians, but also the site of dangerous pre-Christian spiritual presences. Toren (1995: 171) evocatively describes the spiritual suffusion of the Fijian landscape:

All parts of the country are owned and inhabited—even if one does not always know by whom. Indeed, many references to old gods and ancestors are oblique; so I was often told by young people in their late teens that 'something' (*e dua na ka*) was there, or likely to be there, in spots we passed...when I went to the gardens.

Veli, like other Oceanic little people—and especially like the *kakamora* of Makira—embody places and their pasts in new, hopeful projects of imagination that look for signs of indigenous strength. As I understood the situation, my friends in Nagonedau liked *veli* because they were theirs—their own charming, powerful and entirely local figures. *Veli* are hopeful figures in Miyazaki's (2004) sense of hope as the creation of "prospective

momentum”: they come from the past, but their endurance in modern Christian Fiji shows that some parts of inherently local, indigenous Fijian tradition will thrive in the future.

In marking an enduring indigenous strength, *veli* have company. Other Fijian little-people spirits, *rere* and *luveniwai*, have served as spirits of invulnerability called upon by colonial-era resistance movements—that is, as icons of anticolonial hopefulness (see especially Kaplan 1989, 1995). The traditional gods of Fiji, too, live on. As Toren (1995: 167) found, “Villagers in Sawaieke [in Gau, central Fiji] . . . assert ideas of immanent ancestral power and the continued existence of old gods such as Degei (the snake creator god) and Daucina.” Moreover, in times of political turbulence they can serve as signs of local power against perceived foreign threat. After military commander Voreqe Bainimarama’s coup in December 2006, “Off the reefs of Kadavu, a Black Hawk helicopter crashed into the sea while attempting to land on one of three Australian warships that were standing by if needed to evacuate nationals. Fijians said it had been taken down by the shark god, Dakuwaqa” (Fraenkel 2009: 43).

On 12 July 2007, I interviewed the Fijian Methodist theologian Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, who has served as president of his national church organisation and principal of the Pacific Theological College. I asked about the Christian status of traditional deities such as Degei, the paramount god who causes earthquakes and takes the form of a snake, and Dakuwaqa. In his reply, Tuwere said that he felt that such deities had once been “real people” but now had to be understood in terms of myth. Mentioning a radio show he hosted in Auckland, he explained:

I’m getting across to our [Fijian] people on the radio precisely in this area, I’m telling them—because people, when they hear “Degei” and “Dakuwaqa” [they say] “Oo! *tevoro* [devils]”. And I’ve tried to explain this again and again that [it’s] very useful to get into that [i.e., don’t be afraid to explore Fijian myth]. Don’t be afraid to move into that. Explore them. Because we have a tendency, if we are not able to explain something, we end up in the *tevoro* [i.e., we tend to explain the unexplainable with reference to supposedly evil forces]. I try to encourage them to move into this. And the meaningful move is to explain them in the area of myth. . . .

Yeah, Degei, there’s so many stories about Degei moving around. Especially in the light of the present political crisis of Fiji. I happened to visit Parliament the day after the coup in the year 2000. I went there with another friend who just passed away last year, Jone Lagi. I went in. It’s a long story. But this was Saturday morning. The coup happened on Friday. And there, just to cut the long story short, I met my close relative Ilisoni Ligairi [a former member

of the British special forces who participated in Fiji's coups of 1987 and 2000]. ... I tried to visit him now and then for a whole week after the coup. We talked on the phone. And he was relaying to me some old stories from Nakauvadra [the mountain that is Degei's home, considered a spiritually vibrant place], and some people from the hills came to the Parliament to give support, and in the course of our conversation on the phone, Ligairi was telling me, "Well, I, these people, they say this is the time. This is your time. You are being—you are anointed to... initiate the coup." And I told him, "No, no, you have to be very careful. You have to be very careful.... Don't get carried away easily." But there were people who were telling him that he was the new Degei, new Dakuwaqa. When we move into that...I think we're treading on dangerous ground.

I think it's a very thin boundary that I'm working in. I want to see them [traditional Fijian deities] in the light of myth, not throwing them away as useless, but bringing them in—included. But making sense of them so that they tell us something meaningful and useful in today's political situation. [For clarity, I have eliminated some repetitions and false starts, placeholders like "y'know," and my own responsive sounds like "mm hmm" in this transcript.]

Tuwere highlights a key dynamic of modern Christian Fiji: ancestral and pre-Christian spiritual figures, turned into demons and devils by 19th-century missionaries, are still appealing to Fijians for their connections to a powerful past and the promise such connections continue to offer.

The hopeful perspective offered by autochthonous spiritual figures like *veli* has an inherently dangerous aspect in Christian Fiji. The *veli* can hurt people, as seen in Pigliasco's story. Further, land, families and even the nation can be considered to be cursed by relations with figures from the past (Tomlinson 2012, 2014). To talk of *veli* in terms of haunting, however, would be a mistake. They come from the past but they do not haunt the present; they enliven it and suggest something about indigenous presence in the future. As I observed in Nagonedau, the *veli* were seen in a positive light.

GHOSTS

The term for ghost in Fijian is *yalo*. An early Fijian dictionary, from the days when Christian mission influence was less than two decades old, defines *yalo* primarily as "a spirit; soul; shadow of a person in the water" and comments that "The heathen are very much afraid of the spirits of men, whom they believe to appear frequently, and afflict mankind, especially when they are asleep" (Hazlewood 1850: 189; see also Deane 1921: 39). The dictionary goes on to note that Fijians distinguish between the *yalo* of a living person (which often does its evil work while that person sleeps) and the *yalo* of a dead

person (with the *yalo* of a woman who has died in childbirth being especially feared).⁹ Although dictionary definitions are never adequate for understanding ambiguous, historically labile referents, Hazelwood's definitions from 1850 are useful, at least for suggesting that Fijians already believed in something analogous to the English-language category of "ghost" before missionaries helped to reconfigure categories of the spirit world (see below).

As mentioned earlier, I turned the conversation from *veli* to ghosts that night at the *kava* bowl in Nagonedau. But as I wrote in my fieldnotes, Ratu Jo and Ratu Cadri "were happy to oblige" with ghost stories:

I asked if someone could see someone's image and know that that person was dead at that moment, and I was told (by Rt Jo or Rt Cadri, can't recall who) that sometimes people would see someone, think they were alive, and then be told the next day that they had died. We discussed the story I'd heard years ago about Manoa tossing aside human finger bones found in the Nagonedau *vale ni bose* [meeting hall] earthen foundation, then being unable to sleep, seeing a large old-style Fijian with *buiniga* [a traditional hairstyle] indicating that he wanted his missing finger back. And Rt Cadri told a first-hand classical ghost story from his days as a student in Vunisea. The students slept in a large old building from the colonial era which used to include the courtroom. Needing to go to the bathroom one night, Rt Cadri had to walk a long distance through the U-shaped building to get there, and as he did, he had an eerie feeling, with his hairs standing on end. He went anyway. On his return to the sleeping quarters from the bathroom, he passed the old courtroom and, glancing inside, saw a white man sitting there. Frightened, he returned to the sleeping quarters and told his *nana lailai* [mother's younger sister] what he had seen, and [she] said, yes, lots of people see that guy. (January 23, 2006; Notebook E, pp. 42–43)¹⁰

Unfortunately, that night I neglected to write in my notes the specific term we used in discussing ghosts. We probably used *yalo*, but we might also have used the English "ghost".

Whichever term or terms we used, the white man sitting in the courtroom was evidently what many English-language speakers would call a ghost. This was apparent in the fact that this was an old colonial building, white men should not have been sitting there in the middle of the night, and, most compellingly, Ratu Cadri felt his hairs standing up (compare Hocart 1912: 439, Ravuvu 1983: 87). A key point for Fijian ethnography is that this kind of ghost is a subclass of spirits; not all spirits are ghosts, as I discuss further below. Ghosts are a subclass of the dead who are not at rest. A key feature of the ghost in Vunisea, and other Fijian ghosts I will introduce shortly, is that they are socially disconnected figures, unlike some other spirits associated with particular kin groups. Even the thumbless ghost in Nagonedau, who

obviously belonged to that place—his bones being integral to the earthen foundation of the village meeting hall—was not a specific known persona.¹¹

Other anthropologists have encountered Fijian ghosts firsthand. Geir Henning Presterudstuen (2014) begins a recent book chapter on Fijian ghosts with a personal story. He and a friend are visiting Levuka, Fiji's old colonial capital, when they are awoken by someone banging on the door of their cabin. The friend, an Indo-Fijian man named Ajay, answers the door but soon calls to Presterudstuen for help. He sees a young indigenous Fijian girl with "sleepy eyes and slurred speech", and he figures she might have had a bit too much to drink (Presterudstuen 2014a: 127). He speaks to her grumpily while she keeps insisting that she wants to see her cousin. She eventually leaves, but the encounter is not really over. As Presterudstuen is getting ready to go back to sleep, Ajay says it is good that his friend had not been kind to the girl because if you are too nice to a ghost "then you will never get rid of them". This prompts Presterudstuen to ask how something that seemed so human to him could so evidently be a ghost to Ajay.

In his analysis, he turns to examine how ghosts exist in the matrix of Fijian race relations, wherein indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians (citizens of Indian heritage) have long differed over political, religious and economic matters. Ghosts, according to Presterudstuen, "emerge as indicators or markers of someone having overstepped racial boundaries as well as violated Fijian cultural norms" (Presterudstuen 2014a: 132).¹² Ajay was perplexed because he was not certain how he had managed to violate indigenous Fijian protocol, yet he knew he must have done so in order to make the girl show up as she did.

Presterudstuen's argument is persuasive but, in the nature of ghosts, some things slip into thin air. To return to Kadavu: A white man frightening a Fijian man in a courtroom seems overdetermined as a marker of racial politics, but not the kind of racial politics Presterudstuen is discussing. The ghost could not have been punishing Ratu Cadri for any violation of Fijian protocol. Part of the narrative force of the Vunisea ghost story is that it so firmly resists explanation even as it concludes on a taken-for-granted note: "lots of people see that guy".

Thomas Williams, a Methodist missionary to Fiji, reported in 1858, "Of apparitions the natives are very much afraid", and he described a profusion of spiritual figures and practices: "Among the principal objects of Fijian superstition may be enumerated demons, ghosts, witches, wizards, wisemen, fairies, evil eyes, god-eyes, seers, and priests, all of whom he believes to be more or less possessed of supernatural power, and reverences accordingly" (Williams 1982 [1858]: 240-41; cf. Brewster 1922: 215-16, Deane 1921: 24-71). A major anthropological contribution to the study of Fijian spirits was Hocart's analysis of terminology, in which he made the key point that when

Methodist missionaries appropriated a term for spirit or deity, *kalou*-Jehovah was *Na Kalou*, *The God*—they introduced the words *tevoro* ‘devil’ and *timoni* ‘demon’ to “defame” the indigenous spirits (Hocart 1912: 437, 440). But Fijian *kalou* live on, linguistically at least, in various forms, most notably as *kalou vu*, the ancestral founding spirits.¹³ *Kalou vu* are complex, central figures; they are signs of indigenous strength, but they are not *veli*; they are spirits of humans, but they are not ghosts (see Clunie 1986: 80, Hocart 1912: 443, Thomson 1895). These spirits are not lost, wandering, or ambiguous, but firmly emplaced as autochthonous presences. They *must* be around for the land to be both fully indigenous and fully Christian, at least for Methodists (Tomlinson 2009: 159-61). Ghosts, however, do not necessarily mark anything beyond their own unsettling disconnection and restlessness.

In the densely populated Fijian spiritual landscape then, there were many kinds of spiritual figures. There were even different kinds of little people, such as the *rere* and *luveniwai* mentioned above.¹⁴ In addition, Nabobo-Baba (2006: 57-8) describes the *leka* of the land of Vugalei. *Leka* literally means ‘dwarf’ and Nabobo-Baba writes that they are small, hairy forest dwellers who “are considered relatives of the Vugalei [people] (but in a semi-human and semi-spirit way)” (see also Parke 2006: 45, 50).¹⁵

This is a crowded stage and it is necessary to step back, analytically speaking, to see what insights might be gained by putting specific figures together in the same frame.

SUFFERING AND HOPE

Here I will focus on *veli* in comparison to ghosts like the man without the thumb, the sleepy-eyed girl and the man in the courtroom. There are significant differences between a team of dwarves dragging boats down the beach and the ghosts I have described, and not only because the ghosts are showing themselves openly. *Veli* are doing something very different from ghosts. They can help people and also play tricks on them. Ghosts do neither of these things. Instead, they are looking for something lost—a tossed-aside thumb bone, a missing cousin—or mysteriously just sitting there in the middle of the night, unable or unwilling to leave the courtroom long after the last sentence has been pronounced.

Yet, there is also something fundamentally similar about *veli* and ghosts; they have many overlapping characteristics. They belong to the past but keep showing up in the present, like a compulsive repetition. They might travel a little, but they are strongly associated with particular places. Despite this groundedness, they transgress the normal order and are thus a fantastic subject for narratives, at least in the right contexts. They can only communicate by what Webb Keane (2013) metaphorically calls “spirit

writing”, responding to human discourse by replying (when they reply) in a different yet usually recognisable mode.

Ultimately, I argue, *veli* and ghosts belong together—and I hasten to add that I am not just tossing them into an expansive basket labelled “the supernatural”, nor making any larger ontological claim. Rather, I am picking up on Presterudstuen’s argument that ghosts—and *veli*, I add—are “connected to particular ways of being as well as particular ways of seeing, or perceiving one’s place in the world” (2014a: 128; see also Bubandt 2012). Those ways of being, seeing and perceiving, like the speech of that young girl in Levuka, can be slurred and out of joint, but they can also mark distinct relationships between past and future.

As indexes, signs joined to their referents in “a real relationship of causation or contiguity” (Keane 1997: 19), both *veli* and ghosts can point to several meanings at once. They can even seem inherently paradoxical, as shown in Scott’s discussion of *kakamora*. As he observes, *kakamora* are believed to have stones in their armpits which are repositories of massive magical power. These stones iconically resemble shrine stones, pointing to an autochthonous existential plurality in which matrilineages have their own separate origins. But the stones, connected bodily as they are to the *kakamora*, also “double” (2014a: 74) the *kakamora* figures, intensifying their significance as emblems of island-wide unity. That is, the *kakamora* stones index both unity and plurality. “In mediating between these competing models of essential insular unity and essential matrilineal plurality,” Scott writes, “they reference both possibilities at once” (2014a: 77).

This kind of semiotic versatility is one reason to consider *veli* and ghosts in the same analytical frame. Because people can perceive their place in the world in multiple ways, it follows that figures like *veli* and ghosts can be two things at once. Here I will call them “alternative perspectives” for the way in which memory of suffering coexists with anticipation of the good. *Veli* and ghosts belong together, analytically speaking, because they are complementary alternative perspectives, each tending to do more of what the other tends to do less.

To see how they complement each other, I turn to the work of Joel Robbins, who has recently argued that anthropology can engage productively with theology in order to recapture our previous embrace of, rather than anxious distrust of, the subject of the other (Robbins 2006). He argues that anthropologists used to be committed to the principle that human diversity is extensive and profound. In the wake of critiques made since the 1980s of the culture concept and the act of writing ethnography, as well as the postcolonial situation of anthropology in general, many anthropologists have lost certainty that otherness matters. In response, many have turned to a topic that is, on

its surface, universal and perhaps exceeds cultural contouring: trauma.¹⁶ In focussing on trauma, anthropologists have escaped the so-called “savage slot”, but perhaps fallen into “the suffering slot”, which creates a new set of problems (Robbins 2013). Unfortunately, according to Robbins, “we have more and more resigned ourselves simply to serving as witnesses to the horror of the world, the pathos of our work uncut by the provision of real ontological alternatives” (2006: 292).

As an alternative, Robbins proposes an “anthropology of the good,” one focused on topics such as value, morality, well-being, imagination, empathy, care, the gift, time, change and hope (Robbins 2013: 457-58). This is an extensive range of topics, and he does not draw firm guidelines for where all of these paths might lead, but many of them clearly lead away from certainty that the human condition is one of suffering and that anthropologists’ main task is to document marginality, oppression, loss and resistance in projects that ultimately frame all social dynamics in terms of struggles for power. Instead, we can remember, and reignite, the anthropological passion for “finding promise in different ways of life” (Robbins 2013: 456)—both the promise our interlocutors feel themselves and the promise this offers anthropology as a humanist project.

Encouraging the development of an anthropology of the good is not a call to turn away from studies of trauma, for it is brutally evident that trauma marks many societies, and many anthropologists have done an effective job analysing it. Nor is Robbins’ delineation of an anthropology of the good, as I read it, an attempt at thematic rebalancing in anthropology—an attempt to leaven studies of trauma with studies of recuperation and hope. It is, rather, a core question about the demise of culture theory: when the “other” moves from being a figure of critical insight to a figure of domination (to phrase it broadly and simplistically), anthropology runs the risk of soft ethnocentrism. Refusing to respect others *as* others—as differently motivated, and therefore of dialogical scholarly interest—can drain ethnography of its humanity, turning distinct subjects into universal tokens of a presupposed human condition modelled on the concerns of anthropological observers. The anthropology of the good is not just a question of what the good is about, then; it is also a question of what anthropology is about.

The counterposed theoretical models presented by Robbins, with the suffering slot on one side and an anthropology of the good on the other, are both constituted and reflected in indigenous Fijian imaginations of the spiritual world. Ghosts suffer, reaching out in longing and warning, gaining meanings (when they do gain them) in ways that, irrevocably linked to death, seem to offer a universal commentary on human loss as well as a distinctly cultural commentary on matters such as race relations in Fiji. In contrast, *veli*

are figures of the good, “something that must be imaginatively conceived, not simply perceived” (Robbins 2013: 457) and open to being cherished, which most ghosts decidedly are not. Ghosts endure in decay. *Veli* are icons of hopeful imagination. Ghosts can terrify and perplex. *Veli* call attention to indigenous strength that will win out. Their enduring strength means, however, that they can physically punish people. Thus, while serving as bright icons of hope, *veli* also cast the unmistakable shadow of the uncertain moral status of pre-Christian power in Christian indigenous Fiji.

I do not want to overemphasise the distinction between suffering and the good as analytical foci. Robbins (2013) himself takes care not to draw the opposition too starkly. Moreover, in ascetic religious traditions, suffering can be seen as inherently good and a means of generating hope. But the figures I have examined for Fiji mirror the distinction Robbins proposes, with ghosts marking suffering and *veli* often offering hope. A single frame—human imagination of moral-historical relations between past and future personified as spirits—includes figures facing in opposite directions.

* * *

In this article, I have resisted the temptation to bifurcate Fijian spiritual imaginations into “traditional” and “Christian” domains, the kind of splitting that leads to reductive structuralist lineups—*veli* are traditional and hopeful, ghosts are Christian and hopeless—that both oversimplify and fail to offer analytical traction. The role of 19th-century Christian missionaries in contributing to 20th- and 21st-century indigenous Fijian spiritual imaginations cannot, however, be ignored in any general account of trauma, social transformation, senses of liberation and the generation of hope in Fiji. In concluding the article here, I simply note that Christianity, as a “part-culture” (Coleman 2010) offering a holistic system that can never be received holistically, keeps possibilities of both suffering and hope alive at any moment.

Both ghosts and *veli* are defined partly by their liminality, ambiguity and inherently contradictory characteristics—characteristics they share with all spirits (Besnier 1996). Indeed, at least one ghost in Fiji, disrupting the argument I have offered here, seems to embody pure hope. This hope depends, however, on adhering more faithfully to an idealised past: “Security guards at the Parliament House shot video footage of a shadowy figure they claimed was a ghost. Who was it? No one knew”, a journalist observed. “But a newspaper promptly reported that the ghost, speaking through a clairvoyant, called for Fijians to put more emphasis on traditional values” (Vaughan 1995: 136). This ghost, unlike most others, offers hope. But in doing so,

and like most ghosts, he also calls attention to loss. Most significantly, like several of the other ghosts that have appeared in this article—the thumbless man, the glassy-eyed girl, the man in the courtroom—the Parliament ghost is nameless, socially disconnected.

Ghosts and *veli* resemble each other in key ways as figures from the past that cannot help but intrude on the present. The former are defined by restlessness and disconnection; the latter by inherently indigenous, emplaced potential. The figures tend in different directions as they trace paths of moral-historical understanding that are never reducible to single-term explanations of belief, power or experience.

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NOTES

1. In this article, I present several extended quotations from my fieldnotes (currently in my possession). In returning to my notes as I wrote this article, I found that all attempts to paraphrase lost the sense of immediacy as well as the specificity of the stories.
2. Peceli Ratawa, a Fijian Methodist minister, recalls an incident which apparently took place in the early 1950s: “When I was fifteen I became ill, so stayed in bed in my grandparents’ house called Valeniveilewai in Naseakula Village. In

a vision I saw two Fijian warriors with an awesome presence. They had large well-groomed heads of hair and they wore uniforms like soldiers of World War 2. This vision was much stronger than a dream ... Bubu Laisenia said, “Do you know who they were in your vision? They were the Tau-Vilewe, two great warriors named Maitaveuni Dakuwaqa and Mai Vunieli Labasa Madraitamata. They came to visit you just like they used to visit your father, Irimaia Ratawa” (Ratawa 1996: 3).

3. The original text in Sāmoan puts his thoughts to himself in a quote: “Po o ni tagata ea, pe o ni saualī’i, ‘o mafaufauga ia o le ali’i”, which might be retranslated literally as, “Are they humans, or are they spirits?” the man thought (Vaelua 1998–1999: 132). I was told by a Sāmoan student in Auckland that the name of these Sāmoan little people is *totoe*, which resonates with Milner’s definition of *‘autotoe* as a “Legendary race of little men (said to be still seen occasionally)” (Milner 1993 [1966]: 32). The source of the story from which I am quoting, Vaelua (1998–1999), does not use the term (*‘au*) *totoe* but instead refers to them as *tagata pupu ‘u*, literally “short people”. My thanks to Galumalemana Afeleti Hunkin for discussing these terms with me.
4. *Roko lele* does not have a literal meaning, but functions to finish each line of the *meke* poetically. Note that the term *veli* is not used in the actual lyrics. Rather, *leka* ‘dwarf’ is. As I describe below, *leka* can also be used as a term for a sprite-like creature similar to *veli*; here, however, the explanatory text’s use of *veli* and the lyrics’ use of *leka* implies that they are the same thing.

Carey’s (1865) Fijian-language manuscript, which I examined on microfilm at the Mitchell Library in Sydney, has many errors in the text, so translating it becomes a complicated matter of figuring out the most plausible meanings—what was likely intended 150 years ago versus what actually appears in garbled form on the page. A typescript of the source exists which changes some of the errors in the original, which is helpful in some ways and not helpful in others. For expert advice on the best possible translations I am grateful, as always, to Paul Geraghty and Sekove Bigitibau of the University of the South Pacific.

5. The linguist Paul Geraghty (pers. comm., April 2015) observes, however, that when people from Beqa Island, Fiji’s traditional home of firewalking, told him about mythical little people and firewalking, they did not refer to them as *veli*. See also Bigay *et al.* 1981: 131.
6. My fieldnote references to *veli* as “invisible” are misleading. It might be difficult to catch sight of them, but they are not invisible to everyone all of the time, as shown by the vivid descriptions of what they look like.
7. Pigliasco also notes their amusing aspects and occasional hint of foolishness. He writes of the time he was riding in a fibre glass boat that seemed to be going unusually slowly, but picked up speed after dropping off one passenger. A man explained what had happened: *veli* had been riding in the boat, weighing it down, but had jumped ashore at Sese Village because they had seen smoke and wondered if a firewalking ritual was taking place there (Pigliasco 2007: 214–15; compare Seemann 1862: 205 on the lack of extended stories about *veli*, and how “All the accounts... relate to isolated facts,—to their abode, their having been seen, heard

- to sing, caught in a theft, and found to beat the destroyers of their peculiar trees”). Michael W. Scott has observed that in Makira, *kakamora* have a counterpart, the now-extinct *masi*, who are “remarkably stupid” (Scott 2007: 140).
8. For Hawai‘i, Luomala (1951: 9) wrote: “Although there are women and children among the Menehune, little is said about them. No one ever claims to have seen a female Menehune.”
 9. The Holy Spirit/Holy Ghost of the Christian Trinity is called the *Yalo Tabu* (the literal translation of “Holy Ghost”) in Fijian. On Fijian dual souls, see L. Thompson (1940: 105); see also Becker’s (1995) and Herr’s (1981) discussions of the relationship between sleep, dreaming, and visits from frightening spirits.
 10. I originally wrote that he had spoken with a friend after seeing the ghost, but corrected this eight days later with the information that it had been his *nana lailai*. My reference in the notes to this story as “classical” reflects my presuppositions at the time of what a ghost story ought to sound like.
 11. The classic question of how to distinguish categories of spiritual figure has been given insightful treatment for Oceania in the volume by Mageo and Howard (1996). In making the argument I do here, I do not mean to reassert the Durkheimian division between ghosts and spirits, effectively critiqued by Kwon (2008).
 12. Elsewhere in his chapter, as well as in a separate publication (Presterudstuen 2014b), he goes on to examine racial boundaries in regard to sexual relations, and describes the beautiful female spirit Maramarua, who lures non-Fijian men hoping for sex and then reveals herself as an old hag—another well-worn folklore motif.
 13. Paul Geraghty (pers. comm., April 2015) notes that in the language of Western Fiji, the term *kalou* was not originally used, so here it only has meaning in reference to the Christian God. In addition, in Western Fijian, the term for a dangerous spirit is not *tevoru* but *nitu* or *yanitu* (see also Becker 1995, Parke 2006: 44, n. 8). See also Toren’s (1998), and Hocart’s (1912) discussion of *kalou* in comparison with *yalo* and other terms.
 14. Brewster (1922: 222-23), after translating *luveniwai* as “Water Baby” or (more accurately) “Child of the Water”, added: “it had the meaning more of fauns or woodland fairies. The forest was everywhere peopled by them. They were akin to the *Veli*... [as] miniature men, very handsome, with large heads of hair, such as were worn in the old devil days.... I never heard that these *Luve-ni-wai*... were malignant; on the contrary they seemed friendly little folk.... About Suva monkeys were called *eng-eli* [*geli*], which is also the local name for the *Veli* or fairies. When they saw a monkey for the first time they at once said it was akin to their woodland sprites” (Brewster 1922: 222-23, 225, 230, see also Deane 1921: 31-36, Hocart 1912: 446-47, Hocart 1929: 201-3, Parke 2006: 45, 50, Williams 1982 [1858]: 237-39).
 15. Similarly, Luomala observes that *menehune* are not the only little people of Hawai‘i (1951: 24-33).
 16. Others, including Michael W. Scott, have attempted to rethink human diversity primarily in terms of ontology, but I do not discuss that “turn” here.

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographers in Oceania and elsewhere often hear talk about ghosts and mythical little people who have great strength and magical qualities. Two analytical temptations are to dismiss talk about such figures as delusional or to see them as tokens of an expansively defined “hauntology”. This article, however, attempts to bring together ghosts and little people in a more analytically productive way, asking how they serve as both figures in history and figures of history. The recent work of Joel Robbins on an “anthropology of the good” is drawn upon as a key resource. Robbins argues that anthropologists used to be committed to the principle that human diversity is extensive and profound, but that in the wake of critiques of the culture concept and ethnographic writing, many scholars have lost certainty that otherness matters. As a result, many anthropologists have sought out the “suffering subject”, seeing trauma as a universal human experience that perhaps exceeds cultural contouring. In response, Robbins suggests a new focus on topics such as value, morality, time and hope, topics which—while not denying the reality of trauma, nor discounting the ability of anthropologists to study trauma effectively—allow us to find new promise in difference. This article describes Fijian ghost stories and talk about *veli*, mythical little people, and offers an analysis of them as alternative perspectives on the morally marked relationship between past and present. Ghosts are a socially disconnected subclass of spirits that mark suffering and loss. *Veli* (and other autochthonous spiritual figures) are signs of indigenous strength that endures and can win out, even as their non-Christian associations make the promising power they offer also somewhat dangerous.

Keywords: ghosts, little people, hope, trauma, anthropology of the good, Christianity, Fiji

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¹ Corresponding author: Department of Anthropology, College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 2600 Australia. Email: matt.tomlinson@anu.edu.au