

Bonner Querschnitte

Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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Indigenous peoples in the Pacific are increasingly under threat

Schirmmacher learns about the situation of Indigenous Peoples from the High Chief of Savusavu and other leaders across the Pacific

Photo gallery “Visiting the Chief of Nukubalavu on Savusavu Island”

(Bonn, 12.08.2026) During a visit to the high chiefly village of Nukubalavu on Fiji's island of Vanua Levu, Bishop Thomas Schirmmacher met High Chief Ratu Golea Lovodua to discuss the current situation of the iTaukei, Fiji's Indigenous people. The meeting formed part of a series of visits over many years in which Schirmmacher, President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), has sought conversations with Indigenous leaders as well as political, academic, and cultural representatives across Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia.



These encounters included, among others:

Thomas Schirmmacher visiting the Chief of Nukubalavu on Savusavu Island, Fiji
© BQ/Schirmmacher

- He studied the new exhibition on the Yirrganydji people, one of the smaller Aboriginal peoples of northeastern Australia, at the Cairns Museum, where he also discussed contemporary Indigenous issues with Aboriginal representatives.
- He visited the Office of the Clerk of the Parliament of Samoa on Upolu, discussed issues affecting Samoa's Indigenous communities, continued to the President's Palace, and visited major monuments commemorating the history of Samoa's Indigenous people.
- He visited historic Polynesian sacred sites such as Taputapuatea marae and Tainu'u Marae on Raiatea and Marae Mahaiatea on Tahiti. He was accompanied by an Indigenous community leader through the island's interior to sacred places rarely visited by outsiders.

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- He visited Lifou in New Caledonia, travelling from Siloam deep into the rainforest to remote villages and historic sites.
- He visited the Fiji Museum in Suva, whose collections document the history of Fiji's Indigenous peoples from the Lapita culture to the present. He also visited Indigenous churches and Government House.
- He visited the Parliament of the Solomon Islands and the National Museum in Honiara, where he spoke with experts and leading Indigenous women about their situation.
- He studied traditional clothing production in Vaitape on Bora Bora and in New Caledonia, visited the Parliament of New Caledonia in Nouméa, and was given a guided tour of the Musée de la Nouvelle-Calédonie by Indigenous leaders.

In most of these places, he also visited churches of different Christian traditions, especially congregations that still worship in Indigenous languages.

Throughout these visits, Schirmacher also held in-depth conversations with political and traditional leaders from a wide range of cultures and political backgrounds, including:

- James Marape, Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, a Huli leader from Hela Province in the Highlands, a region that is home to a large share of the country's Indigenous population.
- Vainu'upo Nu'usa, High Chief of Sasina village on the island of Savai'i in Samoa.
- H. E. Teburoro Tito, President of the Republic of Kiribati 1994–2003; since 2017 Permanent Representative of his country to the United Nations in New York.
- H. E. Satyendra Prasad, Fiji's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and one of the leading diplomatic voices of the Pacific Island states.
- Sitiveni ("Steve") Rabuka, Prime Minister of Fiji (1992–1999 and since 2022), whom Schirmacher met at an international conference in 2015. Rabuka first gained international recognition after leading the 1987 military coups and later became a central figure in Fiji's democratic transition.
- Samuelu Penitala Teo, a Tuvaluan politician who served as Speaker of the Parliament of Tuvalu from 2019 to 2024 and represented Tuvalu at numerous regional and international parliamentary meetings.



After the kava ceremony © BQ/Schirmacher

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The highlight of these visits was a meeting in Nukubalavu with its elders and High Chief Ratu Golea Lovodua, who holds the traditional title of Tui Na Savusavu, the paramount chiefly title of the Savusavu region.

Nukubalavu, with about 300 inhabitants, is widely regarded within the Savusavu region as one of its oldest traditional settlements. It lies several kilometres inland from Savusavu, surrounded by tropical rainforest.

Nearly all of Vanua Levu's approximately 160,000 inhabitants are Indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) or Indo-Fijians. Most land is held under customary communal ownership rather than private ownership.

Kava (yaqona, commonly called grog) is Fiji's traditional national drink. Prepared from the root of the yaqona plant, it has mild relaxing and sedative effects and is central to ceremonies welcoming guests and marking important occasions. Visitors entering a village are traditionally expected to present a yaqona root to the chief.



Kava ceremony to welcome visitors in Nukubalavu, Savusavu, Fiji
© BQ/Schirmmacher

The High Chief affirmed that the concept of vanua—land, people, and culture as one—remains central to the identity and daily life of his people, perhaps nowhere more strongly than on Vanua Levu. While this system makes participation in the modern economy and political organisation more difficult, it is so deeply rooted in the identity of his people that they hope it will never be fundamentally altered.

Schirmmacher stated: "It is obvious that roads are built primarily for tourism and business. Even the roads leading to tourist destinations where visitors watch Indigenous cultural performances are poor, but those leading simply to neighbouring villages are difficult to use even with four-wheel-drive vehicles."

Despite optimistic official narratives, community leaders repeatedly told Schirmmacher that living conditions are becoming more difficult rather than improving.

The island's vulnerability became evident when Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Yasa made landfall on Vanua Levu on 17 December 2020, killing four people, forcing more than 23,000 residents to seek shelter in evacuation centres, and causing widespread destruction.

The conversations with the High Chief and other community leaders confirmed that the iTaukei of Vanua Levu combine remarkable cultural resilience with growing economic and environmental vulnerability. Strong communal traditions, customary land ownership,

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and political recognition remain major strengths. At the same time, limited economic opportunities and the increasing impact of climate change pose serious challenges to preserving their traditional way of life.

Downloads and Links

- Photo 1: [Thomas Schirmacher visiting the Chief of Nukubalavu on Savusavu Island, Fiji](#) © BQ/Schirmacher
- Photo 2: [After the kava ceremony](#) © BQ/Schirmacher
- Photo 3: [Kava ceremony to welcome visitors in Nukubalavu, Savusavu, Fiji](#) © BQ/Schirmacher
- Photo gallery “Visiting the Chief of Nukubalavu on Savusavu Island”: <https://thomasschirmacher.net/?p=25405>
- Photo gallery “Fiji – the Capital Suva on Viti Levua – Church – Museum – Government – UN”: <https://thomasschirmacher.net/?p=25419>
- Photo gallery “Visiting ancient sacred temple sites on Raiatea and Tahiti and meeting the indigenous Polynesian Mahohi Christians”: <https://thomasschirmacher.net/?p=25380>

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