

From Blackbirding to Epistemic Injustice: Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge, Language, and Culture in Western-Dominated Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the enduring consequences of blackbirding, slavery, and broader colonial exploitation on Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultural identities in Fiji and the wider Pacific. It argues that these historical processes were not only forms of physical and economic violence but also constituted profound epistemic injustices, systematically erasing, devaluing, and appropriating Indigenous ways of knowing. Drawing on decolonial theory, Indigenous epistemologies, and critical pedagogy, the study situates blackbirding within a broader architecture of coloniality that continues to shape contemporary education systems, research practices, and knowledge hierarchies. The paper adopts a qualitative, critical-analytical approach, synthesizing historical records, policy documents, and contemporary scholarship to trace the continuum from colonial extraction to present-day marginalization within Western-dominated education systems. It highlights how the legacies of forced displacement, cultural disruption, and linguistic suppression have resulted in intergenerational knowledge loss and weakened cultural transmission. At the same time, it interrogates the role of modern institutions—including schools, universities, and digital knowledge platforms—in perpetuating or challenging these inequities. A key contribution of this study is its articulation of epistemic injustice as a central analytical lens, emphasizing how Indigenous communities have been systematically excluded from the authority to define, control, and benefit from their own knowledge systems. The paper further explores the limitations of existing intellectual property regimes and policy frameworks, which often fail to recognize the collective, relational, and living nature of Indigenous knowledge. It argues that meaningful recognition within mainstream education requires more than symbolic inclusion; it demands a structural reconfiguration of curricula, pedagogy, and governance grounded in Indigenous values and community leadership. Importantly, the paper advances the concept of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty as a pathway toward restorative justice. This involves reclaiming control over knowledge production, revitalizing Indigenous languages and cultural practices, and establishing ethical and legal frameworks that ensure equitable participation and benefit-sharing. The study also considers the implications of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, which present both opportunities for preservation and risks of renewed extraction and commodification. Ultimately, the paper contends that while full compensation for historical injustices such as blackbirding and slavery may be unattainable, recognition, restitution, and transformation within education systems are both necessary and achievable. By centering Indigenous voices and knowledge systems, and by embracing decolonial and culturally responsive approaches, Western-dominated education systems can move toward greater equity, inclusivity, and sustainability. The findings contribute to ongoing global debates on decolonizing education, safeguarding Indigenous heritage, and advancing social justice in the face of historical and contemporary inequalities.

1. Introduction

The history of the Pacific is deeply marked by systems of colonial exploitation that extended far beyond territorial occupation to include the systematic extraction of labour, culture, and knowledge. Among the most violent of these practices was the Blackbirding, a coerced labour trade that saw thousands of Pacific Islanders kidnapped or deceived into servitude on plantations in places such as Australia, Fiji, and the Americas. While blackbirding is often examined through economic and demographic lenses, its profound epistemic consequences, including the disruption of Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and cultural continuity, remain insufficiently explored in mainstream scholarship. This paper argues that blackbirding, alongside slavery and colonial domination, constituted not only material exploitation but also a sustained process of epistemic injustice, the effects of which continue to shape contemporary education systems.

Colonial regimes in the Pacific were not merely extractive in economic terms; they were also deeply invested in restructuring knowledge hierarchies. Missionary education, colonial schooling systems, and early anthropological research collectively contributed to the marginalization of Indigenous epistemologies, privileging Western modes of knowledge as universal and superior (Smith, 2012; Battiste, 2013). In Fiji and across the Pacific, Indigenous languages and cultural practices were frequently suppressed or devalued within formal education systems, leading to long-term consequences for identity, cultural transmission, and community cohesion (Thaman, 2009). These processes align with what scholars describe as the coloniality of knowledge, wherein power operates through the control and validation of knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007).

The concept of epistemic injustice provides a critical lens through which to understand these dynamics. Epistemic injustice refers to the ways in which individuals or communities are wronged specifically in their capacity as knowers, whether through the dismissal of their knowledge (testimonial injustice) or the lack of interpretive frameworks to make sense of their experiences (hermeneutical injustice). In the Pacific context, Indigenous communities have historically been denied authority over their own knowledge systems, with their epistemologies either appropriated, misrepresented, or excluded from dominant discourses. This has resulted in what may be termed epistemic erasure, a process whereby entire systems of knowledge are rendered invisible or illegitimate within institutional frameworks.

Importantly, the legacy of blackbirding and slavery must be understood as part of a broader continuum of colonial violence and dispossession. Forced displacement disrupted not only social structures but also the transmission of knowledge across generations. Oral traditions, ecological knowledge, and linguistic practices were fragmented, leading to enduring gaps in cultural continuity. These disruptions have been compounded by contemporary globalization and the dominance of Western education systems, which often fail to adequately recognize or integrate Indigenous knowledge. As a result, many Pacific communities continue to experience cultural and epistemic marginalization despite formal independence and policy reforms.

In recent decades, there has been growing scholarly and policy attention to the need for decolonizing education and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith have emphasized the importance of re-centring Indigenous perspectives in research and education, advocating for methodologies that are culturally grounded and community-driven. Similarly, Indigenous scholars in the Pacific have called for the revitalization of local languages and knowledge systems as essential components of sustainable development and cultural resilience (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). These efforts reflect a broader movement toward epistemic justice, which seeks to restore the rights of Indigenous communities to define, control, and benefit from their knowledge.

However, significant challenges remain. Western-dominated education systems continue to operate within frameworks that prioritize standardized curricula, individual achievement, and market-oriented outcomes, often at the expense of cultural relevance and inclusivity. Moreover, existing intellectual property regimes are ill-equipped to protect Indigenous knowledge, which is typically collective, dynamic, and embedded in cultural contexts (Drahos & Frankel, 2012). The rise of digital technologies and artificial intelligence further complicates these issues, introducing new risks of data extraction and cultural appropriation while also offering potential tools for preservation and revitalization (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

Against this backdrop, this paper seeks to critically examine the question: Can the historical injustices of blackbirding, slavery, and colonial exploitation be meaningfully addressed through recognition and transformation within Western-dominated education systems? While full compensation for such profound historical harms may be unattainable, the paper argues that restorative justice, epistemic recognition, and structural transformation are both necessary and achievable. This involves not only integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula but also rethinking the very foundations of education, research, and policy to align with Indigenous values and epistemologies.

The study adopts a qualitative, critical-analytical approach, drawing on historical records, contemporary scholarship, and policy analysis to explore the intersections of colonial history, knowledge systems, and education. It is guided by an integrated theoretical framework that combines decolonial theory, Indigenous epistemologies, critical pedagogy, and intellectual property theory. Through this lens, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates on decolonizing education, safeguarding Indigenous knowledge, and advancing Indigenous intellectual sovereignty in Fiji and the Pacific.

In doing so, the paper not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers seeking to create more equitable and culturally responsive education systems. Ultimately, it calls for a reimagining of education as a space of healing, recognition, and empowerment, where the legacies of colonial injustice are acknowledged and addressed, and where Indigenous knowledge systems are valued as vital contributions to global knowledge.

Table 1: Historical Continuum from Blackbirding to Epistemic Injustice in Education

Historical Phase	Key Features	Impact on Indigenous Knowledge	Educational Implications
Blackbirding Era (19th Century)	Forced labour, displacement, cultural disruption	Breakdown of oral traditions and knowledge systems	Loss of intergenerational knowledge transmission
Colonial Period	Missionary education, Eurocentric curricula	Devaluation of Indigenous epistemologies	Establishment of Western-dominated schooling systems
Post-Colonial Era	National education systems with colonial legacy	Partial recognition but continued marginalization	Curriculum imbalance and linguistic hierarchy
Globalization & 4IR	Digital expansion, standardization, global competitiveness	Reinforcement of dominant Western knowledge systems	Further marginalization unless reforms are implemented

Source: Adapted from Miranda Fricker (2007); Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012); Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986); Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Colonialism, Blackbirding, and Structural Violence in the Pacific

The literature on colonialism in the Pacific has extensively documented systems of exploitation, including forced labour, land dispossession, and cultural suppression. The Blackbirding is increasingly recognized as a form of coerced labour that paralleled slavery in its social and economic impacts. While historical accounts primarily focus on demographic loss and economic exploitation, emerging scholarship situates blackbirding within broader frameworks of colonial violence and epistemic domination.

Colonial systems were not only extractive in material terms but also deeply invested in reshaping Indigenous societies by imposing Western norms, values, and knowledge systems (Smith, 2012). These processes resulted in what scholars describe as cultural and epistemic dislocation, where Indigenous knowledge systems were disrupted through displacement, missionization, and colonial education. The long-term consequence has been the erosion of intergenerational knowledge transmission, particularly in oral traditions and linguistic practices.

2.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Their Significance

A substantial body of literature emphasizes the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems as holistic, relational, and context-specific. Indigenous knowledge in the Pacific is deeply embedded in ecological practices, social structures, and cultural identities, serving as a foundation for sustainability and resilience.

For example, research on Indigenous fishing knowledge in Fiji highlights its critical role in environmental management and community livelihoods, developed through generations of interaction with marine ecosystems. However, this knowledge is increasingly threatened by modernization, urbanization, and the breakdown of traditional governance structures. Similarly, broader Pacific scholarship demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge is central to climate adaptation and socio-ecological resilience, yet remains undervalued in formal policy and education systems.

Despite its significance, Indigenous knowledge has historically been marginalized within Western academic and institutional frameworks, often dismissed as informal or unscientific. This marginalization reflects deeper epistemological biases that privilege written, codified, and empirically validated knowledge over oral, experiential, and relational forms of knowing.

2.3 Epistemic Injustice and the Marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge

The concept of epistemic injustice has gained prominence as a framework for understanding how knowledge systems are hierarchically structured. Indigenous communities have been systematically excluded from the authority to define and validate knowledge, resulting in both testimonial injustice (dismissal of Indigenous voices) and hermeneutical injustice (lack of interpretive frameworks to understand Indigenous experiences).

In the Pacific context, research highlights how Indigenous peoples have historically been treated as subjects of study rather than producers of knowledge, leading to exploitative research practices and unequal power relations. Ethical concerns surrounding research in Indigenous communities have prompted calls for incorporating Indigenous principles such as respect, reciprocity, and relational accountability into research governance.

This body of work underscores that epistemic injustice is not merely a theoretical concern but has tangible consequences for cultural survival, identity, and development. It also reinforces the need for epistemic justice, which involves recognizing Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate and ensuring equitable participation in knowledge production.

2.4 Education Systems and the Reproduction of Colonial Knowledge Hierarchies

The literature consistently identifies education systems as key sites where colonial power relations are reproduced. Colonial education systems in the Pacific were designed to assimilate Indigenous populations into Western cultural and economic frameworks, often at the expense of local knowledge and languages (Thaman, 2009).

Contemporary education systems, while reformed in many contexts, continue to reflect these legacies. Indigenous knowledge is frequently marginalized or tokenized within curricula, and Western epistemologies remain dominant. This has contributed to ongoing cultural disconnection and identity challenges among Indigenous learners.

Scholars argue that meaningful transformation requires decolonizing education, which involves integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and pedagogies into curricula and governance structures. However, the literature also highlights the challenges of implementation, including limited institutional support, lack of teacher training, and tensions between global and local knowledge systems.

2.5 Intellectual Property, Knowledge Ownership, and Legal Challenges

A growing body of research examines the limitations of Western intellectual property rights (IPR) frameworks in protecting Indigenous knowledge. These frameworks are based on individual ownership, originality, and commodification, which are incompatible with the collective and dynamic nature of Indigenous knowledge (Drahos & Frankel, 2012).

In the Pacific, scholars have highlighted the risks of biopiracy, cultural appropriation, and unauthorized commercialization of Indigenous knowledge. While international organizations such as World Intellectual Property Organization have initiated efforts to address these issues, progress has been slow and often disconnected from local contexts.

There is increasing support for sui generis legal systems and the recognition of customary law as mechanisms for protecting Indigenous knowledge. However, the literature indicates that such approaches remain underdeveloped and inconsistently implemented.

2.6 *Emerging Dimensions: Technology, Language Loss, and Cultural Sustainability*

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the intersection of Indigenous knowledge with digital technologies and artificial intelligence. While these technologies offer opportunities for documentation and revitalization, they also pose risks of data extraction and misrepresentation.

Studies highlight that Indigenous languages and knowledge systems are particularly vulnerable due to data scarcity and underrepresentation in technological systems, which limits their inclusion in digital platforms and AI models. At the same time, research suggests that community-driven technological initiatives can support language preservation and cultural revitalization when aligned with Indigenous values.

Additionally, broader literature on cultural heritage loss indicates that Indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly threatened by global forces such as climate change, globalization, and socio-economic transformation. These factors compound the historical impacts of colonialism, creating new challenges for cultural sustainability.

3. Literature Gaps

3.1 *Limited Integration of Blackbirding with Epistemic Analysis*

While blackbirding is well documented historically, there is limited research linking it explicitly to epistemic injustice and knowledge loss. Most studies focus on labour exploitation and demographic impacts, neglecting its long-term effects on knowledge systems, language transmission, and cultural identity.

3.2 *Underrepresentation of Pacific-Centred Perspectives*

Much of the literature is dominated by Western scholars and frameworks, resulting in a lack of Indigenous Pacific voices and perspectives. There is a need for more research led by Indigenous scholars that reflects local epistemologies and lived experiences.

3.3 *Insufficient Focus on Education Systems as Sites of Epistemic Repair*

Although there is extensive discussion on decolonizing education, there is limited empirical research on how education systems can actively address historical injustices such as blackbirding and slavery. The role of education in restorative justice remains underexplored.

3.4 *Gaps in Legal and Policy Implementation*

While theoretical discussions on intellectual property and Indigenous knowledge are well developed, there is a lack of practical, context-specific policy models for Fiji and the Pacific. Research often fails to bridge the gap between global frameworks and local implementation.

3.5 *Emerging but Underdeveloped Research on AI and Indigenous Knowledge*

The intersection of AI, digital technologies, and Indigenous knowledge is still an emerging field. There is limited research on:

- Ethical AI use
- Indigenous data sovereignty
- Risks of digital exploitation

This represents a critical gap given the rapid expansion of AI technologies.

3.6 *Lack of Longitudinal and Interdisciplinary Studies*

There is a scarcity of long-term, interdisciplinary research that integrates history, education, law, and technology to examine the cumulative impacts of colonialism on Indigenous knowledge systems.

The literature clearly establishes that Indigenous knowledge systems in Fiji and the Pacific have been profoundly shaped by colonial histories, including blackbirding, slavery, and ongoing epistemic marginalization. However, significant gaps remain in understanding the full scope of these impacts and the pathways toward meaningful recognition and restoration.

This study addresses these gaps by:

- Linking blackbirding to epistemic injustice
- Centring Pacific perspectives
- Examining education as a site of transformation
- Integrating legal, ethical, and technological dimensions

In doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of Indigenous knowledge governance and its future in Western-dominated education systems.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical lens that combines decolonial theory, Indigenous epistemologies, critical pedagogy, and intellectual property (IPR) theory to examine the historical and contemporary marginalization of Indigenous knowledge in the Pacific.

Decolonial theory provides the overarching perspective, explaining how colonial systems established enduring hierarchies that privileged Western knowledge while marginalizing Indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). In the context of Blackbirding and slavery, this lens highlights how exploitation extended beyond labour to include the disruption and erasure of knowledge systems.

Indigenous epistemologies offer a counter-framework, emphasizing relationality, collective ownership, spirituality, and intergenerational knowledge transmission (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Thaman, 2009). These perspectives redefine knowledge not as a commodity but as a living, community-embedded system, thereby challenging Western assumptions underpinning education and intellectual property regimes.

Critical pedagogy, drawing on Freire (1970), positions education as a transformative space capable of either reproducing colonial inequalities or enabling emancipation. It underscores the need for dialogic, inclusive, and culturally responsive education systems that empower Indigenous communities as knowledge producers.

Finally, IPR theory provides a legal and policy lens to analyse the limitations of existing frameworks in protecting Indigenous knowledge. Conventional systems, based on individual ownership and commodification, are often incompatible with Indigenous worldviews (Drahoš & Frankel, 2012), necessitating alternative approaches such as sui generis protections and customary law integration.

Together, these theories create a multi-dimensional framework that explains:

- the historical roots of epistemic injustice,
- the cultural and ethical foundations of Indigenous knowledge,
- the transformative potential of education, and
- the structural constraints of legal systems.

5. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework translates these theoretical insights into a structured model that explains the relationships between key variables influencing Indigenous knowledge systems in Fiji and the Pacific.

At the input level, the framework identifies colonial legacies (including blackbirding and slavery) and emerging technological systems (e.g., AI and digital platforms) as primary forces shaping knowledge production and control.

The mediating layer consists of:

- Ethical frameworks grounded in Indigenous values (e.g., respect, reciprocity, collective ownership), and
- Policy and governance systems, including intellectual property laws and institutional regulations.

These mediators determine how knowledge is accessed, used, and protected.

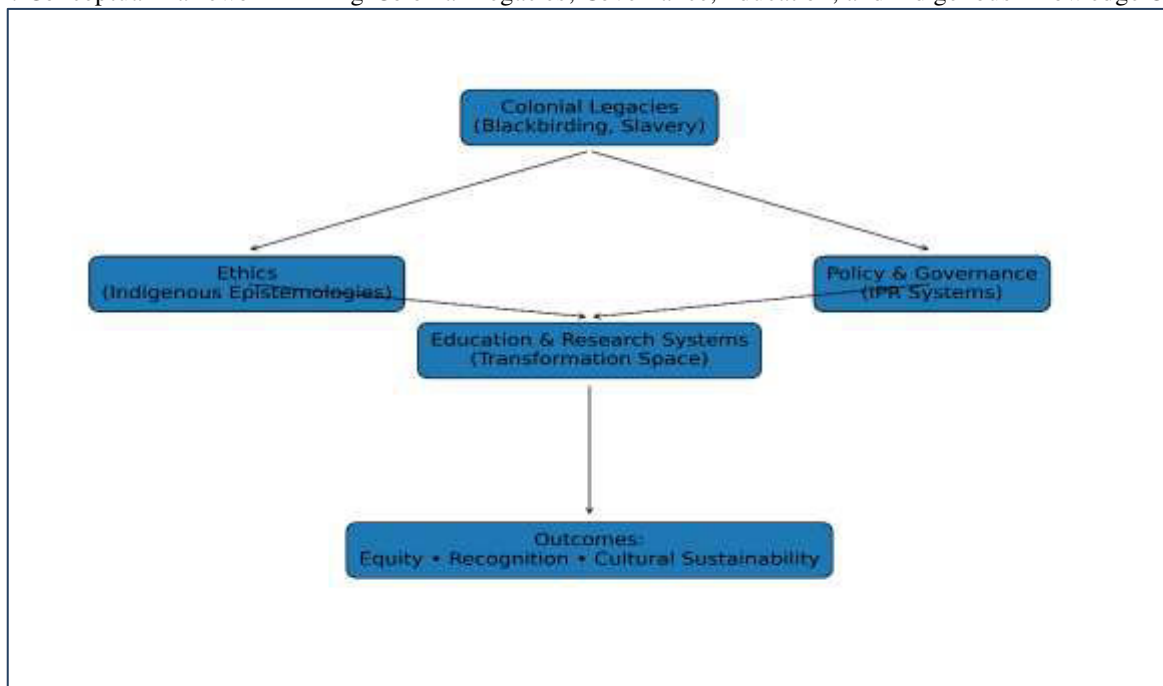
At the core, education and research systems function as transformative spaces where knowledge is produced, validated, and transmitted. These systems can either reinforce colonial hierarchies or facilitate decolonization and epistemic justice, depending on how they integrate Indigenous perspectives.

The output level reflects the outcomes of these interactions, including:

- Equity and recognition of Indigenous knowledge
- Cultural and linguistic sustainability
- Knowledge ownership and intellectual sovereignty
- Ethical use of technology and research practices

Overall, the framework presents a dynamic, interconnected system, where historical forces, governance structures, and educational practices collectively shape the future of Indigenous knowledge systems. It emphasizes that meaningful change requires alignment between theory, policy, and practice, with Indigenous communities at the centre of decision-making processes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Linking Colonial Legacies, Governance, Education, and Indigenous Knowledge Outcomes



6. Discussion and Analysis

This study set out to examine how the historical trauma of Blackbirding—alongside slavery and broader colonial interventions—continues to shape the status of Indigenous knowledge, language, and culture within contemporary, Western-dominated education systems. The analysis reveals that these legacies are not confined to the past; rather, they persist as structural, epistemic, and institutional inequalities that continue to influence whose knowledge is recognized, validated, and transmitted. By situating these findings within decolonial theory, Indigenous epistemologies, and critical pedagogy, this section provides a comprehensive interpretation of the study's implications for Fiji and the wider Pacific.

6.1 From Physical Exploitation to Epistemic Dispossession

The historical processes of blackbirding and slavery were not only systems of labor exploitation but also mechanisms of cultural and epistemic disruption. Forced displacement fractured kinship systems, disrupted oral traditions, and weakened the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. As argued by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), colonialism functioned simultaneously as a political and epistemological project, reshaping not only economies but also the very foundations of knowledge production. The findings align with decolonial scholarship which posits that colonial domination operates through the “coloniality of knowledge”, privileging Western epistemologies while rendering Indigenous knowledge invisible or inferior (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). In Fiji and the Pacific, this has resulted in a persistent condition of epistemic dispossession, where Indigenous communities are excluded from authority over their own knowledge systems. The implications are profound: knowledge loss is not merely cultural but also developmental, affecting environmental management, social cohesion, and identity formation.

6.2 Education Systems as Sites of Reproduction and Resistance

Education systems emerge in this analysis as central sites where colonial legacies are both reproduced and contested. Historically, colonial education in the Pacific was designed to assimilate Indigenous populations into Western cultural and economic frameworks, often at the expense of local languages and knowledge systems (Thaman, 2009). Contemporary systems, despite reforms, continue to reflect these epistemic hierarchies.

The persistence of Western-dominated curricula illustrates what Freire (1970) describes as the “banking model” of education, where knowledge is transmitted uncritically from dominant sources to passive learners. In such contexts, Indigenous knowledge is either marginalized or incorporated superficially, failing to challenge underlying power structures. This contributes to ongoing cultural alienation and identity dissonance among Indigenous learners.

However, the analysis also identifies education as a potential site of transformation. Drawing on critical pedagogy, there is growing recognition that education can be reoriented toward dialogic, participatory, and culturally responsive approaches that center Indigenous voices and experiences (Giroux, 2011). In Fiji, initiatives to integrate Indigenous knowledge into curricula signal a shift toward epistemic inclusion, though these efforts remain uneven and often constrained by institutional limitations.

6.3 Ethical and Epistemological Tensions in Knowledge Governance

A key theme emerging from the analysis is the tension between Indigenous epistemologies and Western knowledge systems, particularly in relation to ethics and governance. Indigenous knowledge is inherently relational, collective, and context-specific, governed by cultural protocols and community responsibilities (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). In contrast, Western systems often conceptualize knowledge as individual, commodifiable, and universally transferable.

This divergence creates significant challenges in research and education contexts. While ethical guidelines have evolved to include principles such as informed consent and cultural sensitivity, they frequently remain procedural rather than relational and transformative (Chilisa, 2012). As a result, research involving Indigenous communities can still replicate extractive practices, reinforcing historical patterns of exploitation.

The findings suggest that meaningful ethical reform requires a shift toward Indigenous-led frameworks that prioritize reciprocity, respect, and long-term accountability. Such approaches align with broader calls for epistemic justice, where Indigenous communities are recognized not only as subjects of knowledge but as authoritative knowledge holders.

6.4 Limitations of Intellectual Property Frameworks

The study further highlights the inadequacy of existing intellectual property regimes in protecting Indigenous knowledge. Western IPR systems are grounded in assumptions of individual authorship, novelty, and fixed expression, which are fundamentally incompatible with the collective and dynamic nature of Indigenous knowledge (Drahos & Frankel, 2012).

Despite efforts by international bodies such as World Intellectual Property Organization and UNESCO, there remains a significant gap between global frameworks and local realities. In the Pacific, this has resulted in ongoing vulnerabilities to biopiracy, cultural appropriation, and unauthorized commercialization.

The analysis underscores the need for pluralistic legal approaches, including the recognition of customary law and the development of *sui generis* systems tailored to Indigenous contexts. Such frameworks must go beyond protection to ensure equitable benefit-sharing and community control, thereby aligning legal mechanisms with Indigenous values.

6.5 Language Loss and Cultural Sustainability

Language emerges as a critical dimension of epistemic justice. The suppression of Indigenous languages during colonial rule, combined with the dominance of global languages in education and media, has led to significant language decline across the Pacific. This has direct implications for knowledge systems, as language is a primary medium through which cultural knowledge is encoded and transmitted.

The analysis indicates that efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages are essential for restoring cultural continuity and epistemic integrity. However, such efforts face challenges, including limited institutional support, resource constraints, and competing socio-economic pressures. Without sustained intervention, the risk of irreversible knowledge loss remains high.

6.6 Digital Technologies and Emerging Forms of Epistemic Risk

The rise of digital technologies and artificial intelligence introduces both opportunities and risks for Indigenous knowledge systems. On one hand, digital platforms can facilitate documentation, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, they can enable new forms of data extraction, misrepresentation, and loss of control (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).

The analysis reveals that Indigenous knowledge is often underrepresented in digital systems, and when included, it is frequently detached from its cultural context. This raises critical questions about data sovereignty and ethical governance, particularly in relation to AI systems that rely on large-scale data extraction.

To address these challenges, there is a growing need for frameworks that ensure Indigenous control over data and digital representations, guided by principles of collective benefit, authority, responsibility, and ethics. Without such safeguards, digital technologies risk perpetuating colonial patterns of knowledge extraction in new forms.

6.7 Toward Indigenous Intellectual Sovereignty

A central contribution of this study is its emphasis on Indigenous intellectual sovereignty as a pathway toward addressing historical and contemporary injustices. This concept extends beyond legal ownership to encompass the right of Indigenous communities to control, manage, and benefit from their knowledge systems in accordance with their cultural values.

The findings suggest that achieving such sovereignty requires a multi-layered transformation, including:

- Decolonizing education systems
- Reforming legal and policy frameworks
- Strengthening community governance
- Promoting ethical and equitable research practices

Importantly, this transformation must be driven by Indigenous leadership and participation, ensuring that solutions are contextually grounded and culturally relevant.

6.8 Synthesis and Implications

Overall, the discussion highlights that the impacts of blackbirding, slavery, and colonialism on Indigenous knowledge systems are deeply interconnected and enduring. These historical processes have produced structural inequalities that continue to shape education, research, and policy in Fiji and the Pacific.

However, the analysis also demonstrates that change is possible. By integrating decolonial perspectives, Indigenous epistemologies, and transformative educational practices, it is possible to move toward more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive knowledge systems. While full compensation for historical injustices may be unattainable, meaningful progress can be achieved through recognition, restitution, and systemic transformation.

This study therefore contributes to broader debates on decolonizing education and advancing epistemic justice, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for policymakers, educators, and researchers in the Pacific and beyond.

7. Conclusion

This study has critically examined the enduring impacts of Blackbirding, slavery, and broader colonial systems on Indigenous knowledge, language, and culture in Fiji and the Pacific. It has demonstrated that these historical processes were not limited to economic exploitation or demographic disruption; rather, they constituted a profound and systematic form of epistemic injustice, whereby Indigenous ways of knowing were marginalized, appropriated, and, in many cases, erased. The legacies of these injustices continue to shape contemporary education systems, research practices, and policy frameworks, reinforcing Western epistemological dominance and limiting the recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems.

A central argument advanced in this paper is that colonialism must be understood as both a material and epistemological project. Drawing on decolonial scholarship, the analysis has shown that the coloniality of knowledge remains embedded within modern institutions, including education systems that continue to privilege Western forms of knowledge while relegating Indigenous epistemologies to the margins (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2007). In Fiji and across the Pacific, this has resulted in persistent inequalities in knowledge production, validation, and transmission, contributing to cultural disconnection, language loss, and weakened intergenerational knowledge continuity.

The study further highlights that education systems serve as critical sites where these inequalities are reproduced but also where meaningful transformation can occur. While efforts to integrate Indigenous knowledge into curricula are increasing, they often remain superficial and fail to address underlying power structures. As emphasized by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), genuine decolonization requires more than inclusion; it demands a reconfiguration of epistemological foundations, where Indigenous knowledge systems are recognized as equally valid and authoritative. This involves shifting from tokenistic representation to structural integration, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives inform curriculum design, pedagogy, and governance.

The limitations of existing intellectual property regimes further underscore the challenges of achieving epistemic justice. Western legal frameworks, grounded in individual ownership and commodification, are fundamentally misaligned with the collective, relational, and dynamic nature of Indigenous knowledge (Drahos & Frankel, 2012). Despite initiatives by global institutions such as World Intellectual Property Organization and UNESCO, there remains a significant gap between international policy discourse

and local realities in the Pacific. This gap perpetuates vulnerabilities to cultural appropriation, exploitation, and inequitable benefit-sharing, highlighting the urgent need for context-specific, culturally grounded legal frameworks.

Language loss emerges as another critical dimension of the analysis. Indigenous languages are not merely communication tools but are fundamental to the transmission of cultural knowledge and identity. The suppression of these languages during colonial rule, combined with their marginalization in contemporary education systems, has contributed to significant cultural erosion (Thaman, 2009). Without sustained and systemic efforts to revitalize Indigenous languages, the risk of irreversible knowledge loss remains high, further entrenching epistemic injustice.

At the same time, the study acknowledges the complex role of emerging technologies, particularly digital platforms and artificial intelligence. While these technologies offer opportunities for documenting and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge, they also introduce new risks of data extraction, misrepresentation, and loss of control (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016). In this context, the concept of Indigenous data sovereignty becomes increasingly important emphasizing the need for Indigenous communities to maintain authority over their knowledge in digital environments.

Importantly, this paper argues that while full compensation for the historical injustices of blackbirding and slavery may be unattainable, meaningful progress can be achieved through recognition, restitution, and transformation. Recognition involves acknowledging the historical and ongoing contributions of Indigenous knowledge systems and addressing their marginalization within mainstream institutions. Restitution requires tangible measures, including policy reforms, resource allocation, and support for cultural revitalization initiatives. Transformation, however, is the most critical dimension, demanding a fundamental rethinking of education, research, and governance systems to align with Indigenous values and epistemologies.

The concept of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty is central to this transformative agenda. It emphasizes the right of Indigenous communities to control, manage, and benefit from their knowledge systems, moving beyond protection toward empowerment and self-determination. Achieving this requires a multi-level approach that integrates legal reform, educational transformation, ethical research practices, and community-led governance. It also necessitates a shift in power relations, ensuring that Indigenous voices are not only included but are central to decision-making processes.

From a policy and practice perspective, the findings underscore the need for holistic and collaborative approaches that bridge global frameworks with local contexts. In Fiji and the Pacific, this involves strengthening partnerships between governments, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities, as well as fostering regional cooperation to address shared challenges. It also requires sustained investment in capacity building, infrastructure, and research that prioritizes Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on decolonizing education and advancing epistemic justice by highlighting the deep and enduring connections between historical injustices and contemporary knowledge systems. It calls for a reimagining of education as a space of healing, recognition, and empowerment, where the legacies of colonialism are addressed, and Indigenous knowledge systems are valued as essential components of global knowledge. While the path toward justice is complex and ongoing, the findings of this study affirm that transformative change is both necessary and possible, provided it is grounded in respect, equity, and Indigenous leadership.

Table 2: Strategic Framework for Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge, Language, and Culture in Education

Domain	Challenges	Strategic Interventions	Expected Outcomes
Curriculum	Eurocentric content dominance	Integrate Indigenous knowledge systems and local context	Inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum
Language	Dominance of English in instruction	Promote bilingual/multilingual education policies	Preservation of Indigenous languages and identity
Pedagogy	Teacher-centred, standardized approaches	Adopt culturally responsive and constructivist pedagogy	Enhanced student engagement and identity affirmation
Policy	Limited Indigenous representation	Inclusive policy reforms and stakeholder participation	Equitable and context-sensitive education systems
Technology & 5IR	Digital divide and cultural disconnect	Contextualized digital learning with Indigenous perspectives	Balanced technological and cultural integration

Source: Adapted from Pierre Bourdieu (1986); Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012); Konai Helu Thaman (2003, 2009); UNESCO (2021)

8. Way Forward

Moving beyond critique, the path forward must be deliberate, multi-level, and Indigenous-led, addressing the structural roots of epistemic injustice while creating practical mechanisms for recognition, restitution, and transformation. The legacy of Blackbirding and colonial exploitation cannot be undone, but its ongoing effects on knowledge systems, language, and culture can be actively redressed through coordinated reforms across education, law, research, and digital governance in Fiji and the wider Pacific.

8.1 Re-centering Indigenous Knowledge in Education Systems

A fundamental priority is the systemic integration of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and pedagogies across all levels of education. This requires more than curriculum inclusion; it demands a restructuring of epistemological foundations so that Indigenous knowledge is positioned as co-equal with Western knowledge systems.

- Curriculum transformation: Embed Indigenous knowledge across disciplines (science, governance, environment, ethics), not as isolated modules but as foundational frameworks.

- Language revitalization: Expand bilingual and immersion models, resource development, and teacher training to strengthen Indigenous language use in schools (Thaman, 2009).
- Teacher education reform: Prepare educators in culturally responsive pedagogy grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and community knowledge (Nabobo-Baba, 2006).
- Community co-governance: Formalize partnerships with elders and knowledge holders to co-design and co-deliver curricula, ensuring authenticity and continuity.

Education must shift from a site of assimilation to a space of cultural regeneration and epistemic justice.

8.2 *Advancing Indigenous Intellectual Sovereignty*

The concept of Indigenous intellectual sovereignty should guide policy and practice, emphasizing the right of communities to control, manage, and benefit from their knowledge systems.

- Recognition of customary law: Integrate Indigenous governance structures into national legal systems to regulate knowledge ownership and access.
- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC): Institutionalize FPIC as a mandatory requirement for all research, commercialization, and digital use of Indigenous knowledge (Chilisa, 2012).
- Benefit-sharing frameworks: Ensure equitable distribution of economic and social benefits derived from Indigenous knowledge.
- Community-controlled repositories: Establish locally governed knowledge archives with culturally appropriate access protocols. These measures move beyond protection toward empowerment and self-determination.

8.3 *Legal and Policy Reform for Contextual Relevance*

Existing intellectual property regimes remain inadequate for safeguarding Indigenous knowledge. Reform must prioritize context-specific, culturally grounded legal frameworks.

- Develop sui generis systems: Tailor legal protections to reflect the collective and intergenerational nature of Indigenous knowledge (Drahos & Frankel, 2012).
- Policy alignment with global standards: Engage with frameworks promoted by World Intellectual Property Organization and UNESCO, while adapting them to Pacific contexts.
- Strengthen enforcement mechanisms: Ensure that laws addressing cultural appropriation and misuse are not only enacted but effectively implemented.
- Regional collaboration: Pacific Island nations should develop collective legal strategies to strengthen bargaining power in global intellectual property negotiations.

Legal reform must bridge the gap between international discourse and local realities.

8.4 *Transforming Research Practices and Ethics*

Research involving Indigenous communities must shift from extractive models to relational, reciprocal, and community-driven approaches.

- Indigenous research methodologies: Adopt frameworks that prioritize respect, reciprocity, and long-term accountability (Smith, 2012).
- Co-creation of knowledge: Recognize Indigenous communities as co-researchers and co-authors, not merely participants.
- Community ethics governance: Establish local review boards with authority over research conducted within their contexts.
- Capacity building: Invest in training Indigenous researchers to lead scholarship and knowledge production.

This transformation ensures that research contributes to community empowerment rather than exploitation.

8.5 *Safeguarding Indigenous Knowledge in the Digital Age*

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and artificial intelligence introduces new risks and opportunities. A proactive approach is essential to prevent digital forms of epistemic extraction.

- Indigenous data sovereignty: Implement frameworks that ensure community control over data collection, storage, and use (Kukutai & Taylor, 2016).
- Ethical AI governance: Require transparency, consent, and benefit-sharing in the use of Indigenous data in AI systems.
- Digital preservation initiatives: Support community-led projects to document and revitalize languages and cultural practices.
- Technology capacity building: Equip communities with the skills and infrastructure to manage their digital knowledge systems. Without such safeguards, digital innovation risks reproducing colonial patterns in new forms.

8.6 *Institutional and Regional Transformation*

Sustainable change requires institutional commitment and regional collaboration.

- Establish Indigenous knowledge authorities: National bodies to coordinate policy, research, and protection efforts.
- Strengthen university roles: Higher education institutions should lead in integrating Indigenous knowledge into teaching, research, and governance.
- Regional cooperation: Pacific institutions should collaborate to develop shared frameworks, research agendas, and advocacy strategies.

- Long-term funding: Governments and development partners must invest in Indigenous knowledge initiatives as a strategic priority.

Transformation must be system-wide, not fragmented.

8.7 Monitoring, Accountability, and Justice Mechanisms

Progress must be measurable and accountable.

- Develop indicators of success: e.g., level of Indigenous curriculum integration, number of FPIC-compliant projects, language revitalization outcomes.
- Transparent reporting: Regular public reporting on the use and protection of Indigenous knowledge.
- Independent evaluations: External reviews to assess policy effectiveness and ethical compliance.
- Grievance mechanisms: Accessible systems for communities to report misuse and seek redress.

Accountability ensures that commitments translate into tangible outcomes.

Table 3: Fiji-Specific Empirical Context: Challenges and Opportunities in Reclaiming : Indigenous Knowledge in Education

Area	Observed Issues in Fiji	Empirical Evidence / Trends	Implications for Education Reform
Curriculum Content	Limited integration of Indigenous knowledge (iTaukei perspectives, vanua concepts)	Curriculum remains largely examination-driven and influenced by Western frameworks	Need for contextualized curriculum incorporating Indigenous epistemologies
Language of Instruction	Dominance of English in formal education	Declining use of Indigenous languages among younger generations	Strengthening bilingual/multilingual education policies
Teacher Preparedness	Limited training in culturally responsive pedagogy	Teachers often rely on standardized teaching approaches	Professional development in Indigenous pedagogies and inclusive practices
Digital Divide	Unequal access to ICT in rural and maritime areas	Urban–rural disparities in digital infrastructure and access	Investment in equitable digital infrastructure and culturally relevant e-learning
Policy Implementation	Strong policy intentions but gaps in execution	Disconnect between national education policies and school-level realities	Need for localized implementation and community engagement
Cultural Identity	Gradual erosion of Indigenous identity among youth	Influence of globalization and Western media	Reintegration of culture, values, and traditions into schooling

Source: Adapted from Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2006, 2008); Konai Helu Thaman (2003, 2009); Fiji Ministry of Education (2019); UNESCO (2021).

8.8 Synthesis: Toward Transformative Justice

The way forward is not a single pathway but a coordinated transformation across systems and scales. It requires:

- Reimagining education as a space of epistemic plurality and cultural regeneration
- Reforming legal frameworks to align with Indigenous values
- Redefining research ethics to prioritize community agency
- Regulating digital technologies to prevent new forms of exploitation
- Empowering Indigenous leadership at every level

While the harms of blackbirding and colonial exploitation cannot be fully compensated, the pursuit of recognition, restitution, and transformation offers a meaningful pathway toward justice. The future of Indigenous knowledge systems in Fiji and the Pacific depends on the extent to which these efforts are sustained, inclusive, and grounded in Indigenous worldviews.

Ultimately, the way forward demands a shift from viewing Indigenous knowledge as a resource to be managed toward recognizing it as a sovereign system of knowledge that is essential to cultural survival, sustainable development, and global intellectual diversity. The challenge is not whether change is possible, but whether institutions are willing to undertake the depth of transformation required to achieve it.

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