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Chapter 4, My Life, in Intimacy and Community in a Changing World: Sikaiana Life 1980-1993

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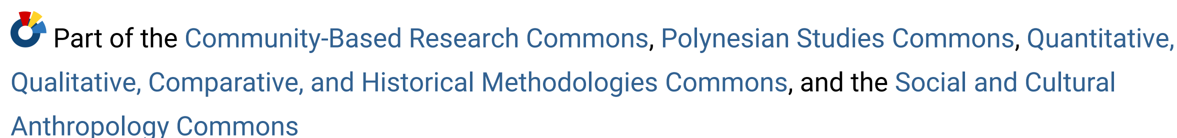
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IV

PARTICIPANT AND OBSERVER:
My Life with the Sikaiana

A fieldworker is not only a researcher, but also a person, and it is in a matrix of relationships, both professional and personal, that I learned about the Sikaiana. I came to Sikaiana to do research, and my methods included both learning about and participating in the daily life of the Sikaiana. Sometimes I was working on specific projects almost every hour of the day, collecting, recording or analyzing information. Other days, I spent most of my time fishing, sitting around talking, or helping neighbors with their chores. Participating in these daily activities was an important source for my understanding of Sikaiana life.

Interviewing takes an informant's time, and the Sikaiana had to work in order to survive. Most were supportive of my research, but not everyone was anxious to stop the day's activities for several hours to answer a lot of questions. Moreover, many Sikaiana, like many Americans, did not enjoy having their lives scrutinized. On the other hand, many enjoyed talking about themselves and explaining their view of events. They also felt that their society was changing rapidly and they wanted me to record their traditions before they were lost.

In writing that I participated in the daily life of the Sikaiana, I don't want to leave any illusions about my ability to survive as a native of the atoll. I could provide labor when there was someone else to oversee my work. There are many skills that I never mastered. But in participating in these activities, however unsuccessfully, I learned about the skills necessary for survival on Sikaiana.

I wasn't a good fisherman, something absolutely essential for livelihood there. The Sikaiana distinguish between two general types of fishing: (1) with a line and hook and (2) with a net. I never liked fishing with a line. My lines always got tangled, caught in rocks, and everyone else always came back with a bigger catch.

I especially disliked fishing with a line outside of the reef. The currents make the canoe harder to manage and the line must be dropped deeper. Even for the Sikaiana, fishing with a line can be frustrating when they are outside the reef. It always seemed that just as a catch was being pulled in, a shark would get the fish before the fish could be brought into the canoe. The sharks rarely attacked people, but they often ate fish caught on a fishing line as they were being pulled in to a boat. When hooked, a fish is slowed down and it is easier for sharks to catch them. One Sikaiana man told me that the sharks simply wait at the passage from the lagoon into the ocean and follow the glimmering canoe bottoms.

The first time I went fishing outside of the reef, it resulted in a total disaster. I went with my neighbor, Uriel, a mature man who is very kind, but also quite taciturn, and not that comfortable with me as a stranger. Indeed, it would take about a year before I began to feel comfortable with him, although he lived next door to me, and the

courthouse, where I resided, stood on land controlled by his lineage. Brown Saua, the young administrator whom I had met in Honiara, was spending his vacation on Sikaiana and suggested to Uriel that he take me along fishing. Uriel was probably less than thrilled by my presence in his canoe.

I had been on Sikaiana for only about two or three weeks. On that day, most of the atoll's men went to catch fish for a special feast as part of the celebrations in honor of Sikaiana's patron saint, St. Andrew. At that time, everyone wanted to try a newly introduced technique called *kura*. A heavy fishing line, 60 to 100 pounds test line, is dropped to the ocean's bottom. A stone is tied to the line with a coconut leaf which is attached to the hook. Once it hits bottom, the line is jerked and the stone comes undone. The line is pulled to the surface with the coconut leaf attached to the hook as a lure. Supposedly, fish at all depths will be attracted by the rising coconut leaf lure, and bite. I write "supposedly," because I never knew any Sikaiana man to have much success with this method. Most of Sikaiana's able-bodied men fished using this technique for most of that day. Very few fish were caught.

On that day, my fishing line kept becoming tangled, eventually hopelessly so, and I was told we'd have to get ashore before it could be untangled. Meanwhile, I just sat in the canoe while Uriel kept dropping his line without catching anything. At one point, Uriel ran out of stone weights. After paddling the canoe a little ways towards the shallower water near the reef, he went diving for a few more. I was tired, my line useless, and I felt cramped from spending the entire day with my knees bent and my buttocks squeezed into the narrow bottom of the dugout canoe. While Uriel was diving to find more stone weights, I raised myself to stretch my legs and sat on a little board placed across the width of the canoe as a seat.

The Sikaiana do not fish with reels and poles. The line is wrapped around a short stick or piece of wood and both let out and pulled in by hand. The line is not rolled around the stick until the end of the day or the fisherman decides to change his location. Excess line lies in front of the fisherman. Usually, providing of course no one is so foolish as to touch it, the pile of fishing line doesn't get tangled. Without thinking at the time, although it seems so obviously stupid now, I seated myself on Uriel's uncoiled fishing line. As a result, when Uriel returned with more stone weights, his line, like mine, was hopelessly tangled. We had to paddle ashore with only one fish. Uriel was mumbling something. At that time, I didn't understand any of the language. But, it was clear that he was very unhappy.

Another time, much later in my stay when I knew Uriel much better, I went out with him and another man, John Tesinu. We went to a place outside of the reef, but in shallow water. Using lighter lines than in *kura*, we dropped them to the ocean's bottom. It was Saturday and we planned on a big catch to hold us through Sunday (the church forbids fishing on Sunday). We started fishing in the morning at about 10:00 AM. By about 4:00 PM we had not caught anything, and I assumed that we would go ashore for the afternoon church service. But Uriel and John were determined for a better catch. Fishing is not sport for them, it is a livelihood. In the evening, at dusk, the fish began to bite. The men kept fishing until after midnight. I, however, was exhausted from sitting

in a cramped canoe and from not catching any fish. After dusk, I simply lay back in the canoe, and to the amusement of Uriel and John, tried to doze. That day I had spent about fourteen hours sitting in a cramped canoe without catching a single fish. At least, I didn't tangle any of their lines.

I was a complete failure at one of the most popular fishing methods on Sikaiana. Men like to dive into coral beds at night to spear fish. Gripping a waterproof flashlight with their teeth, they dive into shallow water a few feet deep and direct the light toward fish resting in the coral. At night, the fish are sluggish and the divers shoot the dazed fish with sharpened steel spears launched from rubber slings. This is probably the easiest technique for catching fish on Sikaiana, and I was no good at it. I could never sink down to the bottom of the coral beds, although they were only about four feet deep. I always floated to the surface before I could take aim with my spear. Once, an accommodating Sikaiana man stood on my back to hold me down under water. I shot the spear at a lethargic fish. And missed. The fish, after its close call with a klutzy foreigner, recovered its senses and darted away.

In certain seasons, the Sikaiana fish for small coral trout with long bamboo poles. A person walks along the shallow areas of the reef and slowly trolls a short piece of fishing line across places where the water is only a few inches above the reef. When a coral trout bites, there is a slight tug on the line. The line is jerked, and then whirled in a giant circle around the fisherman's head. The line and fish are brought back to the fisherman's hand. The fish's head is bitten to kill him, and then it is placed in a leaf basket that is carried on the fisherman's back. Usually, the bait is completely intact on the hook and the fisherman begins trolling again. With moderate luck, a fisherman can catch 50 to 100 fish between evening dusk and darkness. Early in my stay, I went out with Joshua Suasua, the chairman of the Sikaiana Area Committee, to try this technique. I kept snagging my hook in the craggy coral. I'd have to put down my pole and spend several clumsy minutes undoing the hook from the coral. Meanwhile, my pole was being carried off by the currents. Eventually, I got the hook free and retrieved the pole. But then, I had to place a new piece of bait on my hook. After about an hour of this, Joshua, distracted by helping me, told me to stop fishing and just carry his leaf basket. "We just want to catch enough fish so that women don't laugh at us," he explained. And so, I followed behind holding his basket. After a while on Sikaiana, I learned to be better at this technique. But I was lucky to bring in 20 fish while others around me were getting three or four times as many.

I did enjoy fishing with a net inside the reef. In the second year of my stay, I bought a nylon net and, on most afternoons, went with a Sikaiana neighbor to place it along the inside fringes of the reef. In the early evening, as the tide changes, the fish move through underwater channels to different locations along the reef where the water is deeper. By laying the net along these channels between the coral, it is possible to make a good catch in a fairly short time. A net is set up across the small channel used by fish and the fisherman positions himself to the side of it. Every few minutes a few fish appear. Throwing stones a little behind them, the fisherman chases them towards the net. While waiting for some fish to appear, I snorkeled around the coral. As the sun sets, it is chilly, but beautiful. I don't want to leave any illusions about my ability in this

fishing method. I never learned to recognize the locations of these channels or to understand the effects of seasons and tides. I had to go with someone else who knew about tides, locations, and fish passages in order to ensure a reasonably good catch.

There were a couple of other things that I never could do at all. All Sikaiana men are expected to climb trees and I never could. I would get about ten or fifteen feet off the ground and start to shake, much to the hysterical amusement of watching women. In fact, climbing coconut trees is such a basic activity for men that the phrase, *kake te niu*, "climb coconut trees" is an idiom referring to a man's erection. When a Sikaiana woman talks of a man's inability to climb coconut trees, she usually is describing his impotency.

I never mastered the use of a machete. A Sikaiana person can hold a coconut in one hand, and then slice it open with one chop from a machete in the other. I had to put the coconut on the ground and hack away. More often than not, after several glancing blows, I was stopped by a nearby person, who picked up the coconut, held it in his left hand, and then opened it with one or two whacks. People feed pigs with coconut meat by taking their machete and using it to adroitly separate meat from the shell. This is another skill that I never mastered. My left hand which held the coconut, never trusted my right hand which was trying to cut the coconut with a machete from an arm's length away.

I was not much good at making copra. Copra is cooked coconut meat which is sold to cosmetics manufacturers, such as Lever Brothers, who use it in making soap and other cosmetics. Only mature fallen nuts are suitable for making copra. Green nuts still on the tree are good for drinking and some Sikaiana like to eat the soft thin flesh. As the coconut matures, its husk becomes darker and the flesh inside thickens. Eventually, the nut becomes heavy and falls from the tree. These mature coconuts have a thick inner flesh. (These are like the nuts sold in stores in the U.S.) The flesh of these mature coconuts has several uses. They can be eaten, used in cooking, squeezed to make coconut oil, or heated into copra. Sometimes, the Sikaiana keep the mature coconuts and allow them to grow further. The juice inside solidifies into a kind of soft apple which is very sweet. At this point, the coconut has a sprout: it is a baby tree.

Every morning, except Sundays, Sikaiana people go to their coconut groves to look for fallen nuts. Coconuts are not easy to recognize in the undergrowth and it takes eyes that are sharper than mine to see them. I would walk right by ones that another Sikaiana person would pick up. Then, I would bend over to pick up what seemed to be a good nut only to find that it had rotted out from its underside and no longer had any meat.

Once the coconuts are collected, they have to be husked. Usually this is done with a special stick, *koo*, which is sharpened on one end. The blunt end of the husking stick is placed securely in the ground so that the sharp end is about waist high. The idea is to use the husking stick to pierce between the coconut's shell and husk and then pry away the husk. The Sikaiana effortlessly pry off the entire husk with a few rhythmical jerks. I had to spend much longer just lining up the stick between the husk and shell. I also had trouble getting the husking stick to where it could give me the best leverage

between the husk and nut. I often left large stringy pieces of husk on the shell, successful mostly at separating outer layers of the husk from inner ones. In the time that it took me to husk one shell, the average person, male or female, husked three.

Next, the shell of the nut is cracked in half by slamming the blunt side of a machete against it (I mastered this stage of the process). The coconut milk is emptied into buckets and later fed to pigs. The half-shells still holding the coconut meat are then placed on a copra drier. A copra drier consists of a wire platform built over a large steel drum. Usually, these drums are made from 44 gallon gasoline containers which have been brought from Honiara. A fire is made inside the drum to heat the copra on the platform. The coconut shells are cooked in the copra drier for a few hours until the coconut meat shrinks a little bit and separates from its shell. Using an oblong rubber or steel scoop, it is possible to pry the meat out of the shell. At last, something I could do: I was OK at scooping the meat out of the shell. Often, the coconut flesh has to be baked several more hours before it is ready to be bagged and sent to Honiara.

I helped several men make canoes. A Sikaiana canoe starts as a tree and eventually, after work with an axe and adze, it is shaped. Canoe makers let me cut the inside with an adze until the canoe sides began to get thin, and then they took over. A misplaced cut while the log is still thick won't do any harm. But when the canoe starts to take shape and its sides are thin, a misplaced hack could go through the wall of the hull and ruin the entire project, rendering worthless several months of labor.

A person had to have a sense of proportion and shape in order to make a good canoe. One man explained to me that after making several canoes under the supervision of an older man, he had learned to have an image in his mind of what the final canoe would look like. I never had this mental image in my mind. I was capable of doing the slow, painstaking, muscle work of hollowing out the inside of the log. I never worked at shaping the outer edges. In fairness to myself, however, most young Sikaiana men of my age could not make a canoe either.

I provided some labor for house construction. There are basically two types of houses on Sikaiana: concrete and leaf. The concrete ones are set on cement foundations. Only a few men who are skilled as carpenters have the ability to set these foundations. I could provide labor by mixing the cement base with sand and then shoveling the concrete into the planks which marked the foundation. But I never worked on the wooden frames which support walls and corrugated iron roofs.

Leaf houses are made of logs and materials grown on the atoll. I could help move the heavy coconut trees used for the base of the houses' walls. I could help collect some of the logs and thinner trees used for rafters. Sometimes, I hammered down the small roof rafters because I was afraid that the house would collapse as a result of one of my mis-hammered nails.

I did some work normally done by women. I practiced some weaving and plaiting, although I never kept at it long enough to become any good. The Sikaiana women weave floor, wall and roof mats out of coconut palm leaves. They weave fine

sleeping mats from pandanus. Pandanus is a tree with a long leaf which, when properly dried, makes a strong durable material for weaving. I watched Sikaiana women work with pandanus. But I never had the time or patience it takes to be accomplished at weaving the fine strands, less than 1/4 inch across, into mats which are as large as 6 feet across by 6 feet wide.

I helped some women mulch their taro gardens. Sikaiana has two varieties of taro, *kapulaka* and *haahaa*. (A tour report (BSIP 11/1/3, October 8 1963) identifies *kapulaka* as *Cyrtosperma chamissonis* and *haahaa* as *Colocasia antiguorum*). The *kapulaka* simply grows unattended in swamps. I never liked to eat *kapulaka*, but I did develop a taste for *haahaa*. *Haahaa* must be planted, mulched, and harvested. Rows of *haahaa* are planted on top of long rectangular mounds of earth. Women tend these gardens by standing in ditches along the sides of the mounds. The muddy water in these ditches is knee to waist deep. Several times during the growth of the taro, tree leaves are collected for mulch and placed around each stalk in a process that is called *hakataaute*, literally `to decorate.' The work in the swamps is dirty and muddy. Many Sikaiana found it hysterical that a man, an American no less from whom they expected more manly and decorous behavior, was engaging in this filthy work.

There were some areas of Sikaiana life which I had considerably more success in mastering. Eventually, as I became more fluent, people were impressed with my ability in the language. Some Sikaiana had suspected that something must be wrong with their language because several Europeans had tried to learn it without success. I developed a reputation for being able to compose songs, although I could not play the guitar. Since I was often talking with older Sikaiana people, I knew more about many aspects of traditional Sikaiana social life than some Sikaiana, especially younger Sikaiana or those who had lived away from the atoll. I learned genealogies and could recite the relationships between any two people. Only a few Sikaiana were better. Of course, I had an advantage because I had access to genealogical data from many different families and a fair amount of my time was spent in trying to master the intricacies of how kinship affects Sikaiana social life.

Some anthropologists have stories about a specific incident that marked their acceptance by the people with whom they lived. I never experienced one specific event which marked my acceptance. My adjustment to Sikaiana life took time. It was about six to nine months before I began to feel comfortable. For the first few months, I wondered how I would ever learn anything about the Sikaiana and how I could ever manage to stay there for two years. By the end of my first year, I felt that I was understanding things and I started feeling sorry that already half my time with the Sikaiana was past.

After about nine months among the Sikaiana, I was beginning to feel adjusted. I was learning the language and something about the meanings that could be attached to their interactions. At this time, I composed my first song in the Sikaiana language. In the long run, this song did not dramatically change my relationships with the Sikaiana. If I had never composed it, my fieldwork would almost certainly have continued on the same course. But the composition of this song represented an important sign of my progress. I was learning the language, and learning to participate, however awkwardly,

as a knowledgeable and creative member of their society.

The composition of this song was met with excitement by the Sikaiana. There was now "Bili's" song and some interest in trying to determine its metaphors and meanings. A young man gave it a tune which the Sikaiana found pleasing. In retrospect, I later came to see that by Sikaiana standards my song suffered from several faults. It was too long, and the metaphors were a bit too abstract, although these dense metaphors added a certain intrigue to the song because the Sikaiana enjoy hidden or figurative meanings. Despite its flaws, the song served as a public representation of my increasing ability in the language and my participation in Sikaiana life. It was played at dances and parties. It was played for the Prime Minister when he visited Sikaiana in 1981, and when I returned in 1987, it was still known and occasionally played.

Learning a Language

I never was much good in languages when I took them in school. In high school, I studied Latin, French and a little Greek. In college, I took three years of Russian. One summer in college, I tried to teach myself some Spanish and then I went to Mexico, but I could never hold much of a conversation. At various points in my life I could struggle along with varying degrees of proficiency in all of these languages, but I never really considered myself to be a competent speaker in any of them. Before the end of my stay in 1983, I was competent in the two languages used by the Sikaiana: the Sikaiana vernacular, a Polynesian language cognate with other Polynesian languages including Samoan and Hawaiian; and Pijin English, which is the *lingua franca* of the Solomon Islands. Pijin combines English vocabulary with some grammatical features of the indigenous languages in the Solomon Islands. Initially, Pijin is unintelligible to English speakers, but it is comparatively easy for them to learn. Most Sikaiana are fluent in Pijin. Some people who have lived away from the island for much of their lives, especially the young men, prefer to speak it in their informal conversations. Not infrequently, a young man who has recently returned to Sikaiana will reply in Pijin to the Sikaiana vernacular of his elders. Entire conversations are held in this manner. English is the third important language on Sikaiana. All written documents are in English. Most of the church service is in English. People speak English with varying degrees of facility. Some are fluent; most people know at least a little bit.[i]

There is a fourth language sometimes used on Sikaiana. Many older people learned Mota, a Melanesian language used in the 1930's by Anglican missionaries as a *lingua franca* in the mission schools which were attended by many older Sikaiana people. A few older people still use it to write a letter and to pray (the missionaries taught them to do both in Mota.) Mostly, however, older people use Mota when they want to converse and not have younger people understand what is being said. I never learned Mota.[ii]

I was speaking Pijin from the time I arrived in the Solomon Islands. Within three months, I was passable in it. By the end of six months I was comfortable speaking it and using idioms, if not speaking idiomatically. But my ability in Pijin hampered my

opportunities to learn Sikaiana. People preferred to speak to me in Pijin rather than in Sikaiana because, at first, it was so much easier to communicate in that way. It took me about a year to be able to string Sikaiana words together into sentences and beyond. By the end of 1981, I could understand the Sikaiana spoken in formal settings such as meetings. Many people, including most of the women, became more comfortable speaking to me in the Sikaiana vernacular rather than Pijin. Throughout the rest of my time among the Sikaiana (including my return in 1987), I was always learning new vocabulary and idioms, and my ability with the grammar was always improving and expanding into more subtle areas. During my second year on Sikaiana, I could use Sikaiana comfortably in informal settings. Because I was collecting terminology as part of my research, I developed a larger vocabulary pertaining to ritual and specialized matters than many Sikaiana people. Almost every adult Sikaiana, even those who had spent long periods of time away from the atoll, could speak the language more idiomatically. They knew how to bend the language without breaking it. I was a slower, more tedious speaker who sometimes fractured rules. I was told that my biggest problem is my accent. Sometimes, when I met a Sikaiana person for the first time, they seemed to need a few moments to adjust to it and to the unusual experience, quite startling to them, of hearing a Caucasian speak their language.

Learning the Sikaiana language is one of the most wonderful events in my life. Languages do indeed give one another soul by offering another perspective. In many cases, this other perspective reflects the attention to interpersonal detail which is part of Sikaiana's intimate social life. When people are romantically interested in others, sometimes they look at that person from the corner of their eyes. In Sikaiana, there is a specific phrase, *ppula ona kalemata*, which describes this covert but often all too obvious behavior. When someone accidently-on-purpose brushes against the shoulder of a person of the opposite sex to show their interest, it is called *hakavvisi*. Young people are known to seek out confining situations where they might be forced to brush against one another; or at dances a person may steer the body close enough to brush without bumping another. Sometimes, when I get a restless feeling, when I want to simply go for a drive or walk around without any purpose, I think of the Sikaiana word *lulusa* which describes the activities of some pigs as the move back and forth in their pens, or metaphorically, the sometimes restless young men who walk back and forth along path near the shore with no relief from whatever it is that is on their mind.

There are other words which pertain specifically to life on Sikaiana. The night of a full moon the entire atoll is lit up in a beautiful silver shine: perhaps that is why the word for moon, *malama* is similar to the word `lit up' *maalama*. It is easy to see people and walk the paths on such nights. The night of the new moon, when there is no moon in the sky, is absolutely pitch black. Whereas during the full moon, you don't need a flashlight or lantern to walk around, on the night of a new moon, it is impossible to see a foot in front of you. This darkness is called *poulitau*, more than ordinary darkness, which is *pouli*. The pitch dark night of the new moon has its own special name, *tuumaitu*. The early morning and late evening when it is light enough to see the outlines of people but not actually recognize them as individuals is called *sseni*.

The Sikaiana are sensitive to smell and distinguish many different kinds: *manu*

paipu `to smell of a pipe or tobacco'; *manu peka*, `to smell like a flying fox, or to have pungent body odor'; *manu kava*, `to have a urinary smell'; *manu kulii*, `to smell like a dog'; and one of my favorites, from their fairy tales, *manumanu tama*, `to smell of a human' as would be noticed by a man-eating beast. The Sikaiana also like fresh smelling herbs, flowers and perfume. I never paid much attention to a woman's perfume until I lived on Sikaiana. They have a word, *sahio*, which describes the fragrance of perfume left in the air from a woman who has just passed by. It doesn't come from the woman, rather from the area she has just passed through. Today, back in the United States, I find that I now smell perfume left in the air from a woman who has just passed by, and I think of the Sikaiana word, *sahio*.

Field Methods

There was one thing that I was totally unprepared for in doing fieldwork, although it is the most obvious outcome of a methodology based upon participant observation. Before leaving the United States, while I was revising my proposal in increasingly elaborate ways, I had an image of my future self conducting fieldwork as a "researcher," dutifully recording notes, conducting interviews, and extrapolating conclusions. This image of myself as researcher assumed both easy rapport with, and a rigorous distance from the Sikaiana. No one ever told me, or if someone did, I merely ignored them, and foolishly it never occurred to me, that I would also be a human being who had daily needs ranging from getting food and water to having the understanding and companionship of other humans. I brought myself, with all my needs and foibles, along when I went to Sikaiana. I was there as a person, in addition to being a researcher.

I became involved in relationships involving respect, reciprocity, sharing, trust and companionship. I had to make assessments about when people might be trying to manipulate or take advantage of me. I received innumerable kindnesses and much forbearance and felt the obligations these engender. I got angry and felt happy. I enjoyed some events and was frustrated at other times. I had to measure the consequences of my actions in terms of what I was learning about the social values and expectations of the Sikaiana. I shared food with them and ate with them. I made assessments and decisions that affected both my personal life and my research. All the personal and emotional experiences I had in Philadelphia, I also had on Sikaiana.

Much of what I know about the Sikaiana was learned through developing these personal relationships and simply trying to live among the Sikaiana. The non-researcher in me who faced the ordinary problems of human interaction and relationships ended up making as large a contribution to my understanding as that aspiring professional with notebook in hand and theories in head. Participating in their daily lives, I attained an understanding that other instruments of research cannot possibly reach, however replicable, rigorous and "objective" they may be.

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[i] As stated earlier, the Sikaiana language is rarely used as of 2020.

[ii] It seems very unlikely that any Mota speakers are still alive in 2020.