

“WE SEEM TO BE NO LONGER FIJIANS”
Some Perceptions of Social Change in Fijian History*

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The resplendent chiefs in English cutaways and Fijian *sulus* who led the welcome ceremonies for their Queen on her Silver Jubilee visit to Fiji in February 1977 were the undisputed leaders of the whole nation. It was not the first occasion Fijian chiefs have been glad to acknowledge their debt to Great Britain. Has there been any other former colonial territory in the world that celebrated--as Fiji did on October 10, 1974--the anniversary of independence on the centenary of the day it was lost? The point Fijians seem to make through these royal pageants is that their hegemony was never seriously threatened by colonial rule, which they continue to view as a long and beneficial partnership during which the British substantially honored the guarantees made when the chiefs ceded their islands to Queen Victoria. Similarly the constitution of independent Fiji provides extraordinary safeguards for vital Fijian interests. Section 68 reserves the previous acts of the colonial government regulating Fijian affairs and land as entrenched measures of which any modification or suspension requires a three-quarters majority of each house to pass. Embodying the magnanimous suggestion of the Indian-led National Federation Party, any modification that “affects Fijian land, customs or customary rights” must also have the approval of six of the eight senators nominated by the Great Council of Chiefs.

Perhaps the force of these legal safeguards is not appreciated by those Fijians who responded to the hypnotic rhetoric of the Fijian Nationalist Party leader, Sakeasi Butadroka, in the elections of March-April 1977. Butadroka capitalized on the rural villagers’ general feelings of neglect with cries of betrayal. In his view the Fijian chiefs failed to ensure, for instance, that the Prime Minister and Governor-General would always remain Fijians.¹ It almost seemed that he wanted to put the Fijian-led Alliance government out of power just to make his point, and by garnering a quarter of the Fijian votes for his own small party,

*This article was made possible by the permission of the Fiji government to use the records of the colonial government up to 1940. Unless otherwise stated, all references are to documents or collections in the National Archives of Fiji, Suva. The help of the archivist Mr. S. T. Tuinaceva and his staff is gratefully acknowledged.

¹ *Nai Lalakai*, 10 March 1977, p. 4. Butadroka argues here that no non-Fijians should be in Parliament just as the 3.5 million blacks in the U.K. have no member in the British Parliament. See also the statement of Ratu Mosese Tuisawau, *Nai Lafakai*, 17 March 1977, listing various ways in which outsiders rule Fiji.

he nearly achieved what had seemed impossible under Fiji's complex electoral system: a Federation government under an Indian Prime Minister. Only the indecision and disunity of the stunned Federation party victors and the bold exercise of viceregal prerogative by the Vunivalu of Bau and Governor-General, Ratu Sir George Cakobau, enabled the former Prime Minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, to form a minority Alliance government pending new elections.

Yet ultimately, as these elections proved, Fijian power depends on more than legal safeguards or electoral victories: it has always rested implicitly on the capacity of Fijian political leaders, many of them traditional high chiefs, to mobilize the entire people behind them. The threat to this power today probably comes less from the activities of Indian politicians than it does from the disintegrating effects of the breakdown of Fijian communal structures in the countryside, the decay of the villages, and the radicalization of the urban unemployed. The curious thing is that the breakdown of village discipline has been a theme for chiefly anxiety in Fiji for over a century. What is new in the present situation, it could be argued, is not the experience of rapid social change but the loss of a sense of participation in government that once maintained the habits of solidarity and loyalty on which a powerful Fijian presence ultimately depends.

Fiji saw the most ambitious attempt in the Pacific to buttress a traditional-type village life against the eroding example of immigrant lifestyles and the ravages of the free enterprise system. From 1875 Fijian affairs were contained by a semi-autonomous administration directly supervised by the Governor. The European-dominated legislature could damn the system that made it so difficult for Fijians to be exploited, but there was little it could do to change it without British consent. The essential thrust of the Fijian administration--and where it was reasonably successful--was to guarantee a place in the colony for a strong Fijian community life without too much interference by European officials, traders, planters, labor recruiters or even missionaries. A three-tiered system of local government provided a Fijian official and a Fijian-style council at village, district and provincial level.² The provincial governors, styled *Roko Tui*, were usually men of chiefly rank in the province and were personally accountable to the Governor or to his deputy, an official always known to Fijians as the *Talai*. From time to time, in theory annually, these *Roko Tui* met with the delegates of lower officials in the Council of Chiefs (*Boseuakaturaga*) to advise the Governor on all matters of Fijian concern and to celebrate their growing sense of unity as one people.

² The original form of the Fijian Administration is discussed exhaustively in J. D. Legge, *Britain in Fiji 1858-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 151-283.

There were some obvious criticisms of this unique structure, and of the Native Regulations and Fijian courts which regulated the lives of the people within it. It prevented Fijians from exercising the "dignity of British subjects" by denying them democratic processes; it was said to be paternalistic, antiquarian and racially divisive; it slowed Fijian entry into the commercial economy, and entrenched the privileges of a chiefly elite not always remarkable for its dedication to the welfare of the people. On the other hand it effectively halted the alienation of Fijian land and did sustain a leadership that has easily achieved a dominant position for Fijians in the government of independent Fiji. Fijian leaders have been able to cultivate the spiritual bonds that bind them to the people and the land. Yet these bonds are vulnerable to social change. Even when the commands of the chiefs had the force of law, they were powerless to shape the aspirations of youth or to arrest those changes they regarded as destructive of the Fijian way of life.

At the early meetings of the Council of Chiefs there was already some alarm over the new and freer life-style developing amongst young people contemptuous of cultural restrictions associated with "the time of darkness." Men and women were performing *meke*, action-songs and dances, previously reserved for one or other sex. The regulation restricting women from imbibing *yaqona* (kava) was ineffective--even young women were casually indulging the ceremonial liquid and strolling about openly with the young men. And as for wives, they had "none of that modest delicacy and respect for their husbands which they formerly had." The single men's sleeping houses in the villages had been abandoned--and not, it was hinted, for the sanctuary of well-disciplined Christian households. "The evil is that our former customs in these matters have been named *vakatevoro* [devilish] and have therefore been abandoned without the institution of anything better." In 1894 when the chiefs were discussing the curriculum for a New Native Technical School, a magistrate wanted old customs to be taught as one of the subjects. "Our customs have already begun to be forgotten amongst us," agreed the *Roko Tui* of Bua, "and in many ways we seem to be no longer Fijians."³

The number of men and women absent at any one time from their village, district and even province was seen by the chiefs as one of the greatest threats to village life, a running sore in society because it represented the indifference of the young to the common good of the community and the stricter but legitimate demands of traditional authority. A man had not been free in former times to come and go at will; nor was he free under the Native Regulations to leave his village without

³ Proceedings of the Council of Chiefs, 1878, 1879, 1894.

permission for longer than sixty days. Yet as early as 1887 there was a small colony of Ra men living in Suva where, the chiefs complained, "facilities are afforded for vagabonds to congregate and sometimes conceal themselves. Our women also too often wander from their homes and fall into bad habits."⁴ They were alluding to women who drifted to the towns or who were seduced by Chinese storekeepers and Europeans with outrageous ease.

The numbers of absentees were small in the nineteenth century, though still too many for the authorities of the time. In the first decade of the twentieth century, when the chiefs began to lose their grip on the Fijian Administration at the provincial level to English magistrates, there were frequent complaints from the district chiefs (*Buli*) of Tailevu, Rewa and Kadavu about their young men: "They come to Suva and put on no end of 'side' amongst the women and wear collars and ties and smart coats, sport crook walking sticks and turn up in great force at church--the Suva Methodist Jubilee Church on Sundays. They all do a minimum of work and when any trouble arrives away back they go to the Mataqali or the village and so make sure of shelter and food."⁵ To avoid prosecution in the district courts, many returned home on the fifty-ninth day then left again a few days later. In the new regulations of 1912 absenteeism ceased to be an offense for men; only women needed permission of their parents or guardians to be absent more than sixty days--a provision very hard to enforce.⁶ Furthermore European employers could take advantage of the Fijian Employment Ordinance of 1912 to ignore the main safeguards of the former legislation (the Fiji Labour Ordinance of 1895 and the Masters and Servants Ordinance of 1890) and sign on a married man before any magistrate in the colony who could be satisfied that the man had made provision for his dependents. Secondly they could sign on any man without reference to his home authorities if he had been voluntarily absent from his village for two years. Then finally any Fijian could renew his contract on expiry so long as the employer paid his rates and taxes.

The way was again open for recruiters to go into Fijian villages with the time-dishonored "*yaqona* money." After the cancellation of Indian indentures in January 1920, there was a great demand for Fijian labor. The Australian sugar monopolist, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, paid Fijian recruiters for each man they produced in Lautoka for engagement under the Masters and Servants Ordinance (under

⁴ Proceedings of the Council of Chiefs, 1887.

⁵ W. A. Scott's memorandum, 4 January 1910, Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) 10/1242.

⁶ Native Regulation IV of 1912.

which no licenses were required for recruiters).⁷ The men were taken without reference to the Buli of the district or the situation of the village. Communal and family obligations were easily evaded and at the end of the term of indenture, usually six months or a year, the men often returned to their villages penniless. Having planted no garden, they had no food and depended on the strained charity of relatives. Some did not return for months if in lieu of a passage home they were paid a cash sum enabling them to holiday a while in the village of their choice, meeting no obligations of any kind. For the first time in the history of Fiji there were reports of food shortages in good years, while the villages entered upon a steady physical decline from the settlements of substantial, high-built heavily-thatched houses of old Fiji towards the uninsulated, ill-drained coffins of wood and iron that house most contemporary Fijians. By 1927 Islay McOwan, the Secretary of Native Affairs, noting that the government considered “a supply of labor for agricultural purposes was of greater importance than the welfare of the natives themselves,” expressed his fear that the Fijian Administration could collapse.⁸

There was no real danger of collapse; erosion might be a better word for the effects of the policy the Colonial Office rather meaninglessly prescribed as “a careful regulation of the communal system accompanied by a gradual loosening of its bonds.”⁹ The term “communal system” was used as if there were some entity superimposed and separable from Fijian society which could be modified at any time without drastic modification of the groups--the households, villages and federations (*vanua*)--comprising that society. The semantic comfort of such phrases as “loosening the bonds” concealed a woolly imprecision, a clichéd liberalism of “certain certainties” about the nature of man and society. One of these certainties in twentieth-century colonial Fiji was that any restriction on the personal liberty of Fijians was an “obstacle” to their becoming “full British subjects” in the sense that Maoris were understood to be in New Zealand. Governor Sir Everard im Thurn, for instance, sincerely believed that the inability of Fijians to alienate their land robbed them of their potential dignity and that “the interminable little personal services” rendered to the chiefs (and enforced by the Native Regulations) hindered “the creation in the Fijian of that individuality which would, I believe, be the only thing to save him and his race from extinction.”¹⁰ Disillusioned by the defeat of his attempt to

⁷ CSO 23/2576; 27/1115.

⁸ McOwan's minute, 21 March 1927, CSO 27/1115.

⁹ Colonial Office to Sir Henry Jackson, 8 May 1903, CO 83/76, Public Records Office, London.

¹⁰ im Thurn papers, MS2, item 10.

ease the alienation of Fijian lands, he left Fiji with the hope that by gradual replacement of the Native Regulations with English laws Fijians would one day "for the first time become British subjects in the ordinary sense of the term"--in other words they were to become more like hard-working, thrifty, go-ahead Anglo-Saxons were supposed to be, with civil liberties enshrined in a democratic parliament and the common law as in the United Kingdom.¹¹ Reforms in the system were quite few. A new code of Native Regulations in 1912 abandoned "the endeavor--not hitherto successful--to shepherd the native flock into the fold of morality by means of regulation."¹² Fijians could now fornicate fearlessly provided they maintained their "children of the path" where they refused to marry the mother. Divorce could be obtained more easily on the grounds of cruelty, adultery, or desertion. The regulation regarding chiefs--III of 1877--was rescinded so that it was no longer an offense for Fijians to disobey their chiefs "in all things lawful according to their customs." However, the crucial *lala* or personal service rights of the chiefs were still authorized for house-building, garden planting, supplying visitors with food, cutting and building canoes, supplying turtle and making mats, *masi* cloth or other traditional manufactures. Chiefs were obliged--as they were by custom--to feed or pay those performing such services. A village could arrange for the commutation of personal services by making an annual payment in cash or kind. This provision was never acted upon, which suggests that personal *lala* was still accepted by the people as part of the customary order of things and not found overburdensome.

The cornerstone of the "communal system" remained--the Communal Services Regulation (7 of 1912). Individualism was fine as a slogan but when it came to the provision of essential day-to-day services such as the clearing of bush tracks between villages or of land for planting, the constant repairing of thatched houses, the housing of newly married couples, or the supplying of visitors with food, the villages needed the co-operation of the able-bodied men for at least two or three days a week. The government accepted, for want of a practical alternative, that if village leaders were deprived of physical sanctions against the lazy, they needed the support of a regulation. With less justification communal services were extended to include the transport of government officers on duty, the carriage of official letters, and the assistance of Native Lands Commission surveyors.

In a sense the British were stuck with a system for which they professed strong disapproval; at least its self-help aspects saved a consid-

¹¹ im Thurn to CO, 22 September 1909, Governor's Dispatches.

¹² Enclosures, May to CO, 17 May 1912, Governor's Dispatches.

erable expenditure of central revenue. To salve the progressive conscience, Fijians were encouraged, from 1917, to take advantage of a Provision in the new regulations allowing the Governor to grant exemption from communal services if an individual wanted to take up commercial agriculture or some business activity. The applicant had to apply through his district council for the *galala* exemption, as it was called, and pay in advance a fee of £2. 10s. He had to be able to show evidence of his enterprise. There was no provision for credit of any kind, loans or technical advice, nor any guarantee that after a year's exemption the privilege would not be revoked. When it was easy to leave a village for wage employment there was not much to encourage a man to undertake the effort and risks of commercial agriculture. Until 1929 only about 200 to 300 applications were granted each year, just sufficient for the government to be able to reassure itself and Downing Street--in the face of the visible disintegration of village life and the profound dismay of Fijian leaders--that it was making efforts "through a process of education and training, to create in the native an incentive to energy, and to grant him more individual liberty." Henceforward it was understood that where individual interests conflicted with "communitistic demands" the wish of the individual would be given priority.¹³ Unimpeachable sentiments, these, from a British colony in 1920, or was it a veil of cant drawn over a period of avoidable social disruption?

Although Fijian village communities were not hostile to all individual farmers who wanted some temporary relief from their obligations in order to raise money, successful entrepreneurs were few. A major problem was that with the abolition of the nineteenth-century system of taxation in kind and the government marketing organization that had enabled Fijian producers to realize the highest market price for their produce, farmers were now at the mercy of local traders. In copra provinces, many Chinese storekeepers encouraged Fijians to *morketi* (mortgage) articles for about a third of their value with one to three weeks to redeem them. Payments might be made in nuts (at forty for a shilling in 1927) or with immature nuts and the balance made up by working for the storekeeper at low wages. Traders also took liens on growing nuts--a pernicious credit system that swelled the profits of firms like H. Marks or Burns Philp.¹⁴ In 1932 when Ratu J. L. V. Sukuna, the emergent Fijian statesman, became the first Fijian District Commissioner and was appointed to Lau, he tried strenuously to break these hand-to-mouth habits of the people, especially the cutting of small lots of copra to sell locally at deflated prices for grossly inflated trade goods. In 1934

¹³ Fiji Annual Report, 1920, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ See the Lau Provincial Council Book.

yaqona bought in Suva for 2d sold in Lakeba for 6d; canvas shoes 3s 6d in Suva were 6s 6d in Lakeba; black *sulus* rose from 2s each to 6s: "The native told all this will politely agree that the remedy is to sell and buy in Suva. If the initiative is left to him, nothing further will happen, for the average native prefers the certainty of the bird in the hand, bony and tough though it may obviously be, to better nourished ones so far away."¹⁵ A direct consequence of the low produce prices obtained locally was that to meet the payment of provincial rates, the native tax, and the educational expenses of their children, the men had to leave their wives and children in the care of others to go and work on plantations or, in the 1930s, the gold mines--"and for this Fijians will be counted virtuous; their industry will be on men's lips as a sign of Fijian progress."¹⁶

While the government consoled itself that the development of individualistic tendencies was "bound to be slow" and that "it would be dangerous . . . to force such tendencies by artificial means,"¹⁷ the Fijian chiefs fought a spasmodic rearguard defense of their threatened way of life. Without directly challenging the ethos of the day, lest they appear disloyal, the high chiefs urged specific measures to stem absenteeism, strengthen the control of the district chiefs, regulate recruiting activities, and ensure the return of laborers on expiry of their contracts. In 1917, for instance, the Council of Chiefs urged the government to give district chiefs the power to compel men to return-home if they were living in European towns and not in regular employment. To this and similar requests the Governor replied that it was not policy to restrict any further the freedom of the individual. In 1920 the chiefs requested that provinces should be allowed, if they wished, to revert to the payment of taxes in kind, the only scheme that had ever succeeded in ensuring that Fijians would be substantial producers while retaining the full value of their produce and the benefits of a cash income, yet without having to be dependent on European employers.¹⁸ The Colonial Secretary opposed the resolution "on general grounds" as a "retrospective step involving difficulty"--presumably to current employers of Fijian labor, though the argument he advanced was pitched to the vaguer certainties of the liberal ethos: "The basis of the inertness of the Fijian is, to my mind, due to . . . an overburden of communalism, and the difficulty of individual Fijians to assert and maintain individualism." The Acting Receiver General picked up the tune, protesting that the resolution was "a negation

¹⁵ Sukuna to CSO, 23 March 1935, CSO F15/1.

¹⁶ Sukuna to CSO, 17 March 1939, CSO F15/1.

¹⁷ Rodwell to CO, 27 June 1922, Governor's Dispatches.

¹⁸ Proceedings of the Council of Chiefs, 1917 and 1920.

of the recognition of the Fijian as an individual--it insists in an unmistakable manner upon the perpetuation of the communal system."¹⁹

The new orthodoxy was unshakeable. Nothing the chiefs could say would be interpreted other than as reactionary conservatism and, knowing this, they tried again for smaller measures. In 1923 they asked permission to increase provincial rates for men absent from home longer than twelve months, (about one-seventh of the taxpayers or 3,000 men, of whom 840 were in permanent employment), and repeated their request that no man be indentured without the approval of his Buli. Both resolutions were rejected. An official in the Secretariat added privately: "I realize that the foundations of the 'communal system' are being undermined, gradually but surely. Evolution is the natural and philosophic order of things."²⁰

In retrospect it seems obvious that for all the pre-war British hopes and chiefly fears of change, Fijians maintained a remarkable degree of community cohesion through World War II and the 1950s. The Fijian Administration was actually strengthened after the war but in the era of decolonization it began to seem ever more out of keeping with western democratic norms. It was subject to such devastating critiques that in the 1960s the chiefs saw the writing on the experts' wall and authorized a fatal series of reforms.²¹ Provincial councils were reorganized so as to be elected by universal suffrage: henceforward a new kind of politician could replace the traditional spokesmen of the people. The sub-provincial organization of districts, which admittedly had not been functioning well since their post-war amalgamation into larger units, was scrapped. The small districts ("old *tikina*") in the pre-1946 system had been the cornerstone of Fijian communal life: on the agenda of their councils the "things of the government" and the "things of the land" were inextricably mixed. Their idiom was that of custom, so they had been familiar, comfortable forums close to the people. (Many of them had as few as 200 constituents.) The new provincial councils are expected to work with a civil-servant *Roko Tui* and assistants appointed by a central ministry of Fijian affairs in Suva. These men retain the title but none of the mystique of the old *Roko Tui*, nor have they been able to lead villages as well as local chiefs once could. If the rate of collection of provincial rates is any indication--it is so low that figures are not published--Fijians do not identify strongly with the reformed system. There is a widespread feeling that the bottom has gone and the heart, too. The best energies of Fijian villagers are reserved for church functions

¹⁹ T. E. Fell's minute, 10 November 1920, and others, CSO 20/7813.

²⁰ J. S. Neill's minute, 27 January 1925, CSO 23/2576.

²¹ The period is reviewed by G. B. Milner in his introduction to G. K. Roth, *Fijian Way of Life*, 2nd edn., (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1973).

and district festivals, perhaps the main institutional means of keeping alive a dynamic community sense not only in the provinces but in Suva itself.

Forty years ago Rutu Sukuna could look at the rate of social change in the “semi-feudal, semi-self-sufficing society” of Fiji and dare to doubt the “omnipotence of the great octopus of the modern world.”²² He was aware though of the strong fences that were keeping the octopus at bay. They are rotting now; the octopus has every island in reach of his tentacles. Time to mend those fences?

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²² Sukuna to CSO, 29 September 1934, CSO F15/1.