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THE POLITICS OF TRADITION: PROBLEMS FOR POLITICAL LEGITIMACY AND DEMOCRACY IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

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> Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living . . . it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name.
>
> --Jaroslav Pelikan

In many parts of the South Pacific, appeals to a reified concept of "tradition" as a political legitimator have been common for some time.[1] As in parts of Africa, colonial systems of indirect rule tended to make a virtue of necessity in establishing political order on the basis of what were perceived to be existing hierarchies or methods of political and social organization. The language of colonial administration, earlier modes of political sociology and anthropology, and schools of thought associated with "modernization" has produced an image of "tradition" that is construed conceptually in direct opposition to that which is thought to be "modern" or "Western." In the 1980s and 1990s there has been a noticeable growth of "traditionalism" in which images of the distant, precontact, and definitely non-Western past have been evoked in terms of what Callick describes as the ultimate Pacific cliché--"paradise lost" (1991:22).

Appeals to "tradition" emanate from a number of sources and are used in different ways to serve a variety of purposes. Some of these appeals can be seen as a reaction to the negative and racist images of Pacific peoples and their ways of life projected by Western colonialism. Such an appeal is part of the ideology behind the "Pacific Way," said to

have been launched on the international stage by Fiji's prime minister, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, during an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1970 (Crocombe 1976:1). In elaborating the purposes of the slogan, Crocombe says that the colonial experience "left a common unpleasant taste in the mouths of islanders: a common humiliation, a common feeling of deprivation and exploitation" that promotion of and identification with the Pacific Way can help to ameliorate (1976: 13). Similarly, the notion of a "Melanesian Way" has emerged as another specifically reactive force that, in the words of its foremost proponent, provides a basis for identity such that it is "unnecessary for [Melanesians] to be perfect Englishmen or Americans" (Narokobi 1983: 9). These movements share many similarities with the Negritude movement that in the Caribbean and, later, in Africa sought to inspire a regeneration of African values to counter the legacy of oppression and racism left by the colonizers (Nursey-Bray 1984:97). Although Aimé Césaire's original idea of "negritude" represented a wholesale rejection of essentialism, the influence of later figures like Leopold Senghor is said to have transformed it into "a backward-looking idealism, a falsely naturalized, consistent African mentality that tends to reinscribe the categories of a romantic, sometimes racialist European ethnography" (Clifford 1988:177-178).

Some would argue that similar thinking pervades discourses about tradition and cultural identity in the Pacific. Keesing, for example, suggests that these discourses, despite the countercolonial character of their claims, are themselves derived from Western ideologies. He points to the apparent incorporation of Western structures, categories, and premises of thought in the so-called counterhegemonic discourse espoused by those in the business of promoting idealizations of the precontact past (Keesing 1989:22-23). Although it is arguable whether these structures, categories, and premises really are peculiarly or uniquely Western and have no counterpart in indigenous structures,[2] there is little doubt that a reactive process has been at work to elevate the value of select elements of cultural traditions "as symbols of the contrast between those traditions and Western culture" (Keesing 1989:28).

A rather obvious dichotomy between "traditional" and "Western" ways is produced in this process, in which Western values, practices, and institutions often become a major focus of traditionalist criticisms. But this criticism can be a very selective process in which not all Western values and institutions are targeted. Further, liberating ideals are but one ideological component of such constructs as the Pacific Way, which can also be employed as instruments of control by indigenous

elites. One commentator notes that Mara's articulation of the Pacific Way places strong emphasis on the virtues of stability, tradition, and, by implication, "traditional" chiefly rule (Howard 1991:7). As I shall discuss below, the traditionalist emphasis on chiefly rule in Fiji is an important ideological component of contemporary politics and has been used to counter the development of more democratic norms of political conduct and organization.

It is therefore essential in any study of tradition in a political context to observe closely the motivations of those who invoke tradition. And, although the postmodern fashion is to grant a privileged status to so-called insider accounts, there is no reason that these accounts should be immune from "outsider" critiques and no reason to believe that there is only one "inside" view (Keesing 1991:9). Indeed, the last account that should be privileged is that of an entrenched elite. But before we consider such aspects of the politics of tradition, it is necessary to set out clearly some basic ideas about tradition and traditionalism. The distinction between these is an important one, not least because critiques of traditionalism can all too easily give rise to the impression that tradition per se is the major target. It is also important to understand the extent to which tradition is an ineluctable element of all social life, not simply a residual, inert, and "primitive" category of belief and behavior.

Tradition and Traditionalism

The idea of tradition has long been recognized as an important source of political authority and therefore of legitimacy. Despite the assumptions implicit in much of the literature that tradition is related almost exclusively to the underdeveloped world, the idea applies to the West no less than other parts of the globe. Just as anthropologists now recognize that all people and all communities are equally "cultured" (Horigan 1988: 15), so must it be acknowledged that the West (however that may be defined) is equally "traditional."[3] The idea of tradition is, in fact, an important part of the classical heritage of Western democratic thought. At the end of the sixth century B.C. when the people of the Athenian polis adopted the word *nomos* (custom) to denote the law (Maddox 1989:53), they demonstrated explicitly that the precepts of living traditions and patterns of customary social behavior would play an important part in determining the basis of authority and legitimacy in the polis. This endorsement of tradition could scarcely be said to have precluded innovation and experimentation in political life--as the subsequent development of Athenian democracy in the following century so

clearly attests. As with the Pacific Way, however, there was another side to this development, for although the adoption of *nomos* was originally seen as a charter of freedom from the arbitrary rule of despotism, it came to be recognized as another possible type of tyranny--"a series of customs and conventions imposed upon [people] who might not always wish to conform to them" (Sinclair 1951:40).

In post-Enlightenment thought, Weber's influential formulation of three major categories of authority and legitimacy--traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational--brought about a significant change in the perception of "tradition." The manner in which Weber contrasted traditional authority with authority derived from legal-rational sources relegated tradition to the realm of the intrinsically "irrational" and placed it in direct opposition to ideas about "modernization" (1948:56-57, 296). Thus writers like Walzer have drawn explicitly on Weber in describing as "traditional" the Western medieval worldview in which political order was conceived as hierarchical, organic, and unchanging, with an emphasis on personal and particularistic relations that undermined any sort of "independent political aspiration or initiative" (Walzer 1974:8). In commenting on Walzer's position, Pocock points out that the conceptualization of "traditional society" in this way--as the inert and prepolitical antithesis of "modernization'‘--is bound to dichotomize our thinking on the subject, no matter how carefully we try to refine it (1975:338). Pocock, however, is by no means prepared to defend a stance on political order and change that could be described, in Weber's sense, as "traditionalist." In terms of democratic or republican politics, he emphasizes that citizens (as opposed to subjects) are, virtually by definition, involved continuously in the process of public decision making and must therefore acquire the cognitive capacity to go beyond the precepts of hierarchy and tradition (Pocock 1975:50).

Writers like Pocock, who are critical of the traditional-modern dichotomization, are no more prepared to give normative endorsement to a society that lives only by these precepts than Walzer is to his version of "traditional society." To take the objection to Weber's account to its logical conclusion invites criticism of the notion that whatever is "traditional" in social and political life is, in some normative sense, opposed antithetically to something we call "modern." For this antithetical treatment of the concepts has given rise, inter alia, to the entirely mistaken idea that as everything that comes under the rubric of "modern" is, practically by definition, "rational," so everything that can be categorized as "traditional" is "irrational" or at best nonrational. More generally, the dichotomization of tradition and modernity has given an implicit positive evaluation to almost any kind of innovation, on the one

hand, while, on the other, it automatically ascribes "a negative connotation of backwardness and unthinking conservatism" to tradition (Smolicz 1988:387). In a similar vein, Wilson draws attention to the way in which the dichotomization has been rigidly empiricized so as to present an undialectical image of two "sides" of the world--one standing for the rational, innovative West, and the other for the primitive, traditional Third World (1984: 100). Furthermore, he points out that terms such as "tradition" and "the primitive" form the key concepts associated with our conceptualization of "otherness" and "the other" (Wilson 1984:133), a form of conceptualization against which Said directed his passionate condemnation of "Orientalism" (Said 1978).[4]

The dichotomous treatment of the concepts described above also invites criticism in relation to limitations imposed at the most basic level of inquiry. As Gould points out, the very idea of dichotomy gives rise to a restrictive iconography that depicts two ends of a single continuum as representing polar opposites (1989:50).[5] Elsewhere Gould acknowledges, although in a qualified fashion, the usefulness of some dichotomous thinking insofar as it helps to organize thought around simplified models. But he does urge a more expansive approach capable of incorporating further possible renditions of conflicting or oppositional concepts to "provide an amplitude of space without forcing us to forgo our most comforting tool of thought" (Gould 1987:8-9). Many writers have sought to expose the false or at least misleading nature of the tradition-modernity dichotomy and, especially, to demonstrate that neither tradition itself nor its function as a source of authority and legitimacy is necessarily divorced from or at odds with rational or reasoned processes. Friedrich, for example, has argued that the very bases of reasoning and rational argument are in fact grounded largely in tradition (1972:13). Similarly, Popper has shown in his work on scientific method that traditions, like scientific theories, are the means "by which we try to bring some order into the chaos in which we live so as to make it rationally predictable" (1972:131). In another context, Jarvie (1970) demonstrates that cargo cults can be understood as rational attempts, within their frame of reference, to achieve their particular aims. And as MacDonald and Pettit point out, the famous Hopi rain dances, although "manifestly ineffective in bringing about precipitation," may nonetheless function "rationally" to consolidate group identity and promote social activity (1981:38).[6] On a different level altogether, it is evident that the program of rationalization envisaged by the modernization school of development studies for the now not so "new" states of Africa and Asia has been spectacularly unsuccessful in many vital respects.[7]

The consignment of all that is "traditional" to the realm of the irratio-

nal has also, and in some ways deservedly, attracted scathing criticism and condemnation from proponents of conservative political philosophy. Oakeshott, for example, describes the Rationalist as "the enemy of authority, of prejudice, of the merely traditional, customary or habitual,"[8] who commits the facile error of "identifying the customary and traditional with the changeless" (1962:1, 4). That this latter view had a profound impact on the way in which earlier schools of anthropology mistakenly viewed their subject societies can scarcely be doubted; so-called traditional societies were not "prisoners of the past" but had their own dynamics of change (Balandier 1970:172). Oakeshott's attack on rationalism in politics of course echoes Edmund Burke's classic dicta on the evils of radicalism and the more innovative styles of politics generated by the ideas of the Enlightenment that he so deeply abhorred. For Burke, tradition was to be exalted both politically and epistemologically as the most reliable embodiment of knowledge and practice, representing as it did the progressive experience of the species and the wisdom of the ages (Freeman 1980:29). But innovative thinking and political action have never required abandonment of the so-called partnership between present and past. They merely require that we recognize that tradition, or any particular tradition, is not immutable, permanently fixed, or immune from criticism or change. Quite apart from this, it is ridiculous to suppose that we can completely escape the past or free ourselves from its formative influences--even if it was thought desirable. Popper makes this point clearly:

> [W]e could not live in the social world, did it not contain a considerable amount of order, a great number of regularities to which we can adjust ourselves. The mere existence of these regularities is perhaps more important than their peculiar merits or demerits. They are needed as regularities and therefore handed on as traditions, whether or not they are in other respects rational or necessary or good or beautiful or what you will. There is a need for tradition in social life. (1972:130-131)

Popper goes on to suggest that, in dealing with tradition, two main attitudes are possible. The first is to simply accept it uncritically--which very often means that there is little or no awareness associated with such acceptance (Popper 1972:122). This attitude is close to what some anthropologists describe as "simply living" a culture or way of life. The second attitude is critically aware not only that something is a tradition, but also that it is subject to change. This awareness may result in acceptance, rejection, or compromise, but at the very least the tradition

is thought about consciously. According to Popper, it is only when this level of critical awareness is reached that we are able to free ourselves from the "taboos" of a tradition, even if we can never entirely loosen its more generally encompassing bonds (1972: 122). But at this point it also becomes possible to reify, objectify, invent, or consciously construct tradition, to appeal to tradition, and to use the concept of tradition as a political legitimator. It is at this point, then, that a doctrine of "traditionalism" can emerge and take on an explicitly ideological character that lends itself readily to instrumental manipulation. Rather than ameliorating or expunging the taboos of tradition, it can reinforce them and also create new ones.

The purpose of the present discussion, then, is not to mount an attack on tradition per se, but to make a critical distinction between tradition and what Friedrich calls the "normative theory of the importance of tradition" (1972:114), which underscores the ideological and instrumental functions that the concept can serve. These themes can scarcely be held up as novel ones in the literature--Friedrich's study was published about twenty years ago. At much the same time, Eisenstadt located the ideological rendering of tradition in the context of transitions to modernity, in which he saw questions of authenticity or "true traditions" arising frequently as adequate legitimators were sought for new patterns of social and political behavior.

> As a reaction to the possibilities of erosion, the tendency known as "traditionalism" can develop, preparing the soil for potential dichotomy between "tradition" and "traditionalism". Traditionalism is not to be confused with a "simple" or "natural" upkeep of a given tradition. Rather, it denotes an ideological mode and stance oriented against the new symbols; it espouses certain parts of the older tradition as the only legitimate symbols of the traditional order and upholds them against "new" trends. Through opposing these trends, the "traditionalist" attitudes tend towards formalization on both the symbolic and organizational levels. (Eisenstadt 1973:22)

Several years later, Colson noted that in colonial Africa anthropologists had found "traditional" rules "being invented on the spot to legitimate a course of action desired by the very realistic manipulators of the local scene" (1975:75). The context in which this took place is especially interesting, for the success of many of these appeals to tradition was apparently due largely to the resonance they struck with the British style of conservative thought that pervaded the colonial service.

> An appeal to tradition against impinging authority, of course, is effective only if those in authority are prepared to recognize the validity of other ways of life. It was a highly effective device in British colonies which were administered by officials who came from a country with a long tradition of common law, a respect for inherited position, and dominated by a Burkean belief in gradualism. It had less force in the French colonies. It had almost none in the United States with its policy of cultural assimilation where effective power was in the hands of the upholders of a particular tradition to which others were expected to conform. In Africa, therefore, we find local communities legislating under the guise of an appeal to tradition and also keeping at bay attempts to foist new programs upon them by arguments that the programs were alien to their traditions.[9] (Colson 1975:83-84)

In the decade after Colson made these remarks, Keesing and Tonkinson edited a special issue of the journal *Mankind* titled "Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of *Kastom* in Island Melanesia" (Keesing and Tonkinson 1982), and Hobsbawm and Ranger published their provocative collection of essays on the invention of tradition (1983). Like Colson, Ranger found that in colonial Africa invented traditions often received official endorsement because the colonizers thought that they were respecting age-old African customary practices (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:250). But the colonizers went further, introducing something that was not in accordance with traditional practice--the rigid codification of what were assumed to be customary laws, land rights, and political structures. The consequences of this were far-reaching.

> Codified tradition inevitably hardened in a way that advantaged the vested interests in possession at the time of its codification. Codified and reified custom was manipulated by such vested interests as a means of asserting or increasing control. . . . Paramount chiefs and ruling aristocracies . . . appealed to 'tradition' in order to maintain or extend their control over their subjects.[10] (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983:254)

In some more recent studies, the notion that invented traditions have been used for politically instrumental purposes has informed further analyses of contemporary power struggles in the Pacific (for example,

Keesing 1989; Lawson 1990, 1991). But the issue of "invention" insofar as it implies inauthenticity has provoked responses from anthropologists who are concerned, inter alia, with the contrast that is necessarily drawn between "tradition as inheritance from ancestors," on the one hand, and tradition as the "manipulative rhetoric of contemporary politicians," on the other (Jolly 1992:49). Jolly objects to this contrast because of its tendency to promote an essentialist view of Pacific cultures, because it implies that only the advent of the West brought real social and economic change, and because authenticity is equated with unself-consciousness and, as a logical corollary, inauthenticity with self-consciousness (1992:49). A strong sense of self-consciousness, however, is now seen as incumbent on all those whose studies concern "others." Keesing, for example, urges more self-reflexivity in scholars of the Pacific, arguing that they should recognize as problematic "the implications and epistemology of our projects and representations" and noting that the "frame of certainty that surrounds scholarly expertise--like mythical history--is less solid than it seems" (1989:37). But this does not imply immediate surrender to the relativist void in which critique becomes almost impossible. It simply entails the recognition that no one epistemic position is especially privileged and that no observer can claim to have captured the Archimedian vantage point from which the essence of Truth can be grasped--and this applies to "insiders" no less than to "outsiders." With respect to the latter, Keesing addresses an issue that impinges on the whole question of "epistemological imperialism."[11]

> [S]pecialists on the Pacific do not best serve the interests of a less hegemonic scholarship or best support the political struggles of decolonizing and internally colonized Pacific peoples by suspending their critical judgment or maintaining silence--whether out of liberal guilt or political commitment--regarding mythic pasts evoked in cultural nationalist rhetoric. Our constructions of real pasts are not sacrosanct, but they are important elements in a continuing dialogue and dialectic. (Keesing 1989:37)

On a related theme, many anthropologists have drawn critical attention to some of the logical consequences of anthropology's revered doctrine of cultural relativism. Burling points out, for example, that although this doctrine rightly insists, among other things, that judgments about other cultures cannot be cast simply in terms of ethnocentric American or Western standards, the eagerness to counter vulgar

assumptions of cultural superiority can all too easily lead to the permanent suspension of judgment about almost any activity or practice and to the doubtful conclusion that "all human customs are equally defensible" (1974:9). Gellner's warning that we can be so blinded by an "excessive indulgence in contextual charity" that we are unable to discern "what is best and what is worst in the life of societies" is similarly apposite (1970:42).[12] Returning to the specific problem outlined by Keesing, Jolly agrees that it is hardly fruitful to suspend critical judgment, maintain one's silence, or be denied the right to speak at all. But she does propose the abandonment of styles of writing that presume that "we" have certain truths whereas Pacific politicians are in the business of "perpetrating illusions or self-delusions," urging scholars to turn their attention to more productive avenues of inquiry and analysis in the processes surrounding symbolic constitutions of tradition.

> Then our questions might cease to be those of persistence versus invention, of whether tradition is genuine or spurious. We probably cannot readily resolve the political conundra about whether and when to speak and write about Pacific traditions. But we might at least stop using the language of inauthenticity.[13] (Jolly 1992:63-64)

But the question of authenticity *is* relevant to the politics of tradition in the Pacific. It is relevant not merely to "outsiders" (whether these be academicians, aid workers, diplomats, or foreign-policy makers) but also to Pacific leaders and Pacific people generally in the conduct of their political activities. Take, for example, the following statement from Vanuatu's Prime Minister Lini.

> Traditional custom and culture, which are important and vital influences in our society, provide another challenge for us. Some people, mainly politicians, have used culture, custom, and custom chiefs for their own aims. . . . People have used the idea of "custom" to totally contradict the idea of development and democracy in this country. On Santo and Tanna custom has been carried to extremes by people who incorrectly claim they respect traditional ways. It has become a political weapon and this has made it into something that is not Melanesian at all. (Quoted in Weisbrot 1989:86-87)

Whatever we might say about the accuracy of Lini's claims and accusations here, questions of authenticity and inauthenticity are clearly

important to certain aspects of politics in Vanuatu. Further, it is Lini who is using the language of inauthenticity--not an "outside" academic commentator. In other words, the specter of inauthenticity does not figure exclusively in the language of "outside" experts or commentators--it features regularly in the discourse of Pacific islanders and clearly has a political salience. Furthermore, it may plausibly be argued that the language of inauthenticity is perfectly acceptable in countering certain kinds of political rhetoric that attempt to use demonstrably false or misleading accounts of "tradition" in order to enhance political power. As we shall see shortly, it is especially relevant to the context of political developments in Fiji, where traditionalist rhetoric and the ideology of traditionalism have played an exceptionally significant role in shaping perceptions of national politics. So although we may well be advised to cease using the language of inauthenticity where it is clearly irrelevant, inappropriate, or otherwise unwarranted, to abandon it altogether is to deny its utility in understanding, analyzing, and criticizing important categories of political phenomena.

Before exploring these issues further, it is important to spell out more precisely what is meant by "tradition" or "traditional" in the specific context of Pacific politics. Tradition is usually taken to denote continuity with the past. In most parts of the Pacific, however, it is often taken to imply the precolonial or at least precontact past, and this meaning is generally reflected in academic references as well.[14] The prevailing notion among both Pacific islanders and outside commentators is that the genuinely (or authentically) traditional or customary is that which is unpolluted by Western influences. This notion attributes a certain pristine quality to traditional life that accords well with aspects of the "fatal impact thesis" (Moorehead 1987).[15] In this context, "tradition" becomes a value-laden term--carrying with it a positive connotation of what is "good" (in social and political life) in specific opposition to that which is Western (which can be another way of saying "modern")--and so the evaluative images of the dichotomy depicted earlier are inverted.[16]

Although the evocation of indigenous values in opposition to those of the West as well as idealizations of precolonial or precontact pasts can be regarded sympathetically as appropriate responses to the negative images engendered by the colonial experience, these acts must also be recognized as devices by which some political leaders can legitimate their own authority while at the same time suppressing political opposition. I have argued elsewhere that traditionalist appeals can often involve the retrospective homogenization of what were (and still are) quite diverse collections of communities. A homogenized or unitary

image of the traditional way of life is then held up as a suitable standard for contemporary political practice (Lawson 1993). Viewed in this way, there is not so much a bringing of "the past into the present"[17]--that is, resurrecting past practices and making them meaningful in the contemporary sphere--as a projecting of some current state of affairs back into the past and seeking to legitimate it by invoking the traditionalist refrain "it has been this way since time immemorial." The past thus becomes something of an organic paradigm of the present, and its relevance as a serious political factor is dependent on its authentic reflection of the *Volkgeist* (Al-Azmeh 1991:482). As with classic conservative ideology and political romanticism, the idea of tradition here is linked closely to the "natural order of things," which is upset only at great risk to the very fabric of society.[18] Nowhere has this been more clearly apparent in the Pacific than in the case of Fiji.

The Politics of Tradition in Fiji

Fiji is home to approximately 700,000 people, just under half of whom are the descendants of predominantly Melanesian settlers who arrived in successive waves of migration from about 1500 B.C. European contact in the seventeenth century was eventually followed by British colonization in 1874, and although there was nothing intrinsically static about Fijian societies before this time, there is no question that the changes wrought by colonization were unprecedented and profound. For one thing, the diverse peoples of Fiji were brought together under a single political entity as a crown colony, and institutions designed to reflect the new "national" character of the island group were created as much for administrative convenience as for any other reason. One such institution was the Great Council of Chiefs, the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, now regarded widely as one of the foremost symbols of "Fijian tradition." Although there had been some gatherings of chiefs in the precolonial period (mostly in the east), the Bose Levu Vakaturaga is a colonial artifact, brought into being under colonial rule. Since it has existed now for over one hundred years, it can be called traditional in some sense--just as a material object of a certain quality may be called an antique after a similar period has elapsed. But it is certainly not traditional in that pure, pristine, precolonial sense described earlier, nor has it existed since "time immemorial."[19]

The Bose Levu Vakaturaga raises a number of. issues, one of which is whether it really matters if something that is regarded as traditional (in the "since time immemorial" or precontact sense) is in fact of relatively

recent origin or if its origins are Western, indigenous, or whatever. It raises again the question of the relevance of authenticity. Jolly, for example, asks, "Why shouldn't church hymns, the mass and *bislama* be seen as part of Pacific tradition, alongside pagan songs and indigenous languages" (1990:4). In these particular examples, it seems clear enough that questions concerning origination, authenticity, and so forth are largely irrelevant, inappropriate, or simply beside the point--at least in the political context with which the present discussion is concerned. Furthermore, developments in religion and language of this kind can be viewed as part of the continuous growth of social institutions and as part of a "living tradition." In another study, I have agreed that the exposure of certain traditions in Fiji as inauthentic in the sense that they are not age-old practices at all, but have been developed through colonial design or practice, is in itself unremarkable. But I have argued also that the relevance of the issue is contextually determined and can be especially important where political authority and legitimacy are at stake (Lawson 1992:61-84). In other words, it is the objectification of tradition and its ideological rendering in the form of traditionalism that makes it politically salient and therefore relevant to the study of political power in Fiji.

Another profound change brought by the colonizers was the introduction to Fiji of its second major population group, initially imported from India to serve as a labor force for the colonial plantation economy. The two major population groups, the indigenous Fijians and the Fiji Indians, together make up over 90 percent of the present population, with small numbers of Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese, and other Pacific islanders making up the remainder. This kind of demographic composition is frequently described in terms of classic plural society theory,[20] the tenets of which endorse essentialist notions about the internal unity, boundedness, and exclusivity of cultures.[21] The application of plural society theory to the analysis of race or ethnic relations in Fiji has tended to depict each of the major ethnic groups not only as internally homogeneous, bounded units, but also as mutually and inevitably antagonistic. This analysis translates clearly and directly into political terms, thereby giving rise to the superficially plausible (but quite erroneous) impression that the military coups of 1987 were prompted largely, if not exclusively, by ethnic or racial tensions.[22] The details of the events and circumstances surrounding the coups have been described quite exhaustively in the literature and need not be recounted here. However, it is important to note the extent to which the idea of Fijian tradition was used by those who sought the overthrow of the

elected government, the abrogation of the constitution under which it came to power, the effective return to power of the old chiefly elite, and the promulgation of a new constitution designed permanently to entrench Fijian political supremacy.

The conventional view of Fijian tradition is that portrayed by Fiji's most powerful political leaders, the paramount chiefs from the eastern regions of the island group.[23] **A** number of ethnographic studies have highlighted the relatively hierarchical structures of chiefly power and control in these regions, which more closely approximate the Polynesian model, and have contrasted them with the lower level of stratification found in the central and western areas of Fiji's largest and most populous island, Viti Levu.[24] Arguments about the contextual significance of these differences in sociopolitical structures, especially in terms of their importance in analyzing the events of 1987 and subsequent developments, have been canvased in more recent literature with writers like Scarr attributing no special political importance to intra-Fijian cultural differences (1988:3). This view accords with the tendency of plural society theory, noted above, to treat the broader categories of ethnic groups as internally homogeneous. Others recognize that there has been considerable resentment amongst Fijians from the central and western areas of Viti Levu concerning the predominance of eastern chiefly power and that this resentment is related to differences in "traditional society" (Norton 1990:61). In another study, I have argued that an overarching impression of cultural homogeneity, which emerged and developed in the colonial era (largely through the system of indirect rule) and was carried forward as a powerful unifying political device into the postindependence era, has obscured much of the diversity in Fijian society in terms of both the present and the past (Lawson 1990). But the most important element of this analysis, at least for the present purposes, concerns the extent to which the homogeneous or unitary version of Fijian society has allowed a similarly homogeneous version of "tradition" to be promulgated by those who command the authoritative high ground on interpretation and whose legitimacy in the contemporary era has been largely dependent on this interpretation, namely, the eastern chiefly establishment.

The unitary view of tradition that underscores eastern chiefly power comprises several different strands or themes. One of the most important of these themes concerns the concepts associated with *vanua* (literally, "land"). Traditionalist interpretations of ideas about *vanua,* which incorporate a host of mystical values as well as more practical aspects, have developed strong normative links with eastern chiefly authority

and have come to constitute a powerful political symbol subject to intense, conscious manipulation. In a seminal work on this subject, France traces the development of colonial orthodoxies that link many of the important concepts associated with land to chiefly legitimacy (France 1969; Lawson 1991). In another recent study, these concepts have been explored more specifically in relation to "Fijianess"--"constituting identity and authenticity in Fijian culture" (Williksen-Bakker 1990:232). In a classic statement on the link between the land and Fiji's leading chiefs that was reported by the local press during the 1987 election campaign, the Alliance deputy prime minister, Ratu Sir David Toganivalu, charged the opposition with attempting to destroy the inseparable link between the *turaga* (chiefs) and the *vanua,* while at the same time warning of the dire consequences that this would have for the future of all Fijians: "The *Turaga* and the *Vanua* were one--one could not exist without the other--the chiefs were a bulwark of security for all and custodians of Fijian identity, land and culture . . . to remove chiefs would pave the way for instability" (*Fiji Times* 1987:1).

Through rhetoric of this kind, the chiefly leaders of the Alliance have portrayed themselves as the embodiment of a unified Fijian tradition; they have sought, in effect, to represent the very essence of the Fijian way of life and on this basis have laid claims to the exclusive mantle of political authority and legitimacy. The chiefly establishment has thereby effectively denied any political legitimacy to opposition forces, whether these consisted of Fiji Indians or other indigenous Fijians. In the aftermath of the May 1987 coup and, later, in the process of constitutional change, eastern chiefly monopolization of authority came under challenge from other actors in the drama. The military, under the control of coup leader Rabuka, sought a much more influential role in the political process as did leaders of the fundamentalist nationalistic Taukei movement, which had been instrumental in orchestrating unrest during the period leading up to the military takeover. Both relied on an appeal to tradition, but in the end their success was limited. It was evident that the symbolic resources associated with this sort of appeal were linked too closely with the eastern chiefs to be appropriated by any other group. As Norton notes, "ultimately it was the chiefs and their councils who controlled the most politically potent 'cultural capital', the power of legitimation" (1990:151).[25]

Let us now return briefly to the process of molding or constructing an "authentic" Fijian identity --a process that is linked closely to the idea of tradition. The general idea that cultural identity is something that is frequently constructed in opposition to "another" is not new, and it has

been observed in many contexts. Thomas (1992), for example, argues that the self-representation inherent in this process cannot take place in isolation--it must always be constituted by way of contrast with a tangible externality or difference. But this is only part of the story. A major theme discerned in most studies of the phenomenon is the attribution of a range of negative qualities to the "other"--which provides a suitable contrast for those positive qualities assumed to characterize the group in question.[26] This practice is especially common in ethnic stereotyping, which, as Hall observes, reveals much less about the groups subjected to this kind of definition than it does about the group that produces it. In her particular case study, Hall argues that ancient Greek writing about barbarians was usually an exercise in self-definition insofar as the barbarian was constructed in negative oppositional contrast to the ideal Greek (1989:ix).[27] In much the same way, a constant stereotyping of Fiji Indians (and vice-versa) has accompanied the process of building a "Fijian identity"--which of course is equally stereotyped. This stereotype of Fijian identity is necessarily a homogenized, unitary one--that is in the nature of a stereotype.[28] And, most important, it is grounded firmly in the idiom of chieftainship as exemplified by the eastern chiefly establishment, and it is supported strongly by an equally homogenized image of "tradition."[29] Thus *all* Fijians are placed under the aegis of eastern chiefly authority via a mechanism that treats them as a cultural whole for this particular political purpose.[30]

The homogenization of a diverse collection of people through these sorts of mechanisms for political purposes is hardly unique to Fiji. Nor is the ease with which dominant groups can impose their version of traditional orthodoxy. One example is the idea of a "Great Tradition" propagated by Brahmans in India, who, in maintaining their position of privilege, "engaged in a gigantic 'cut and paste' job, attempting to continually revise and propagate an orthodox version of *the* Great Tradition" (Miller 1966:27). Other examples abound in the homogenizing processes evident in the development of one-party ideology in Africa, where many indigenous political leaders have evoked images of a unitary, precolonial society in order to legitimate one-party rule as a reflection of "authentic" African political practice (Lawson 1993: 197-198). Ibingara's critique of this practice is especially pertinent to the present discussion:

> If any leader were to claim to be practicing the one-party system as an indigenous African system, he should candidly and

> logically answer the question, *which one?* For instance, what type of African one-party system, assuming one existed, did Obote impose on Uganda? If he were to base his concepts in the Langi traditions of his kinfolks, he would automatically alienate the majority of his countrymen whose systems . . . differed from his. Which one-party system did Nkrumah, a Nzima, operate in Ghana among his diverse nationals? The claim of the legitimacy of one-party states as based on Africa's past, therefore, is impossible to substantiate. (Ibingara 1980:253)

Returning to the Fijian case, the idea of a single, overarching Fijian tradition that can be articulated or expressed only through a single institution--namely, "traditional" eastern chiefly authority--leaves little room for any effective claim to political legitimacy by opposition groups, whether these contain Fiji Indians, other indigenous Fijians, or any combination of these or other ethnic groups. I suggested earlier that the critical level at which something is recognized as a tradition is also the level at which questions concerning objectification, invention, authenticity, and so forth can arise, and I noted further that the "language of authenticity" features in the discourse of Pacific islanders themselves--not just in academic papers on the subject of tradition or traditionalism. In the context of Fiji's postcoup politics, debate about the interpretation of "real" tradition has become a hotly contested issue --especially with respect to the new constitution, which, before its promulgation, received official endorsement by the reconstituted Bose Levu Vakaturaga. This body claims that many important aspects of the document reflect legitimate traditional political ways: indeed its own legitimacy is premised on its "traditional status," and it has been accorded a fairly powerful position as the Upper House under the new constitution. But in the wake of the coups and the promulgation of the new constitution, claims of the kind made by the Bose Levu Vakaturaga have attracted criticism in Fiji on the basis that they are not founded on genuinely traditional practices. A booklet issued by the former National Federation Party-Fiji Labour Party coalition is replete with accusations that the new constitution violates all understanding of tradition in Fiji. Its authors claim that

> The present regime has distorted Fijian custom and tradition, particularly as represented in the Constitution. The Constitution is contrary to Fijian traditional constitutional values which

> are based on the principles of consensus and the accountability of traditional chiefs. (National Federation Party and Fiji Labour Party 1991:5)

And, they add,

> The civilised principles of modern democracy were inherent in Fijian culture and tradition, but these are not reflected in the Constitution. It reflects more the traditional authoritarian militaristic values inherited from western dictatorships than the true values of Fijian Christianity and traditional ethics of chiefly leadership. (Pp. 5-6)

As with the earlier example concerning Vanuatu, the accuracy of interpretation is in some senses irrelevant. The point is that "tradition" and the practices that it is used to legitimate are contested ground among Fijians themselves--at least in the sphere of national politics and power. There are many Fijian traditions or customary practices associated with other spheres of life that are valued almost universally and endorsed for what is regarded as their intrinsic merit, regardless of their historical continuity or "authenticity." As argued earlier, however, the political salience of an issue is contextually determined, and the politicization of tradition in Fiji has been grounded largely in a struggle for the retention of political power and control by a group of chiefs seeking to make exclusive claims to national political legitimacy. In this case, questions of authenticity are clearly important for participants in the drama.

The implications for democratic politics of a singular claim to political authority and legitimacy are clear enough and can be illustrated by reference to one of the most basic tenets of democratic theory, that political power cannot be claimed as the permanent and exclusive preserve of any one person or group. It is always open to contestation, and it is therefore only held temporarily and conditionally.[31] It may seem odd, then, that the new constitution contains many high-sounding references to "democracy" when it is evident that the intent of those responsible for its promulgation, including the Bose Levu Vakaturaga, is to deny genuinely democratic opportunities to opposition forces competing for political power.[32] But the international political environment demands that lip service be paid to a moral vocabulary in which the word "democracy" unquestionably takes pride of place. The constitutional fig leaf provided by an elected parliament and the choice of name for the

Sovereign Democratic Republic of Fiji are signs that the chiefly regime feels the need to secure external respectability and legitimacy--which could hardly be achieved by adopting some more accurately descriptive title such as the "Autocratic Chiefdom of Fiji."

Another point to be considered concerns the manner in which elements of both "tradition" and "Western ways" are selectively praised or condemned, honored or repudiated, depending on the particular issue at stake, for one of the keys to understanding a system of thought is to ask about the selectivity of its interpretation of tradition (Pelikan 1948:15-16). With respect to Fiji, this selectivity is best illustrated by reference to religious practices and political institutions. Among indigenous Fijians, the beliefs and practices of the wholly Western religion of Christianity have become widespread. Indeed, a much higher percentage of Fijians, and Pacific islanders generally, can be described as practicing Christians than is the case for the populations of most Western nations (if we take church attendance and other external signs of devotion as indicators). The practice of Christianity in Fiji is one example of a tradition that is clearly postcontact and is also widely endorsed as having significant intrinsic merit. In contrast, many of the Western values that support the practice of democratic politics have been rejected by some elements of the Fijian polity on the explicit grounds that they are alien and therefore contrary to the "Fijian way of life."[33] It is further suggested that democracy as a form of government lacks legitimacy vis-à-vis those traditional forms of political authority that are manifest in the chiefly system--and most especially in the chiefly system that characterizes eastern Fiji. In short, the rhetoric suggests that democracy as a form of government is both inappropriate and illegitmate in Fiji because it is Western and not a part of Fijian tradition.

But claims of this kind raise other issues and prompt certain questions. We should ask, first, as Ibingara has of Uganda and Ghana, which Fijian "tradition" supports the political order now in place in Fiji, and, second, what gives this order its legitimacy. A third question concerns the issue of interpretation. In this context, it is obvious that "tradition" does not speak for itself. It must be both activated and articulated by an authoritative and legitimate voice. At the same time, any other voice raised in opposition is necessarily denied legitimacy and authority. Further, the selection and interpretation of certain aspects of tradition, rather than the wholesale promotion of all that is reputedly traditional, implies a purposive motive that we are entitled to call instrumental. Finally, it is worth noting that although a "tradition," a "custom," or a "folk way" may well reflect the popular character of a

practice, it does not exclude the "indubitable truth" that "a folk-way may be the way of the folk in power" (Hamnett 1975:15).

Conclusion

In considering the case of Fiji, the concept of tradition has reached the level of awareness at which it can be treated critically or reflexively. But this is, as I suggested earlier, the same general level of consciousness at which it can be appealed to in those normative terms that promote the importance of tradition. In the national political context of Fiji, this kind of appeal has a strong political motivation and is clearly instrumental in terms of legitimating chiefly authority, In other parts of the world, including postcolonial Africa, it has been used as a repressive device to legitimate authoritarian political structures such as the one-party state. Such an ideological or doctrinal rendering of tradition demands conformity with its precepts and prescriptions and is aimed at conserving a particular political order. Further, its ideological purity depends, at least implicitly, on the construction of the same dichotomy between "traditional" and "Western" that has been so roundly condemned in anticolonial literature but that has now been inverted in the rhetoric of those who denounced it in the first place. This rhetoric produces the same false essentialism that seduced past generations of scholars into believing that there are determinate characteristics of Western and non-Western "minds" (Bernstein 1991:93).

It is also useful to consider traditionalism in terms of a self-contained discourse that functions to unify a particular field of thought in such a way as to exclude alternative modes of thinking--or at least to de-legitimate them. The particular function of traditionalist discourse in the context described above is to present a simple unitary view of an "authentic," precontact past (it must be precontact to ensure its pristine quality, and it must be depicted as authentic to ensure its validity). This view is then used to identify the "legitimate" locus of political power (namely, a chiefly system), which in turn ascribes legitimate political power and authority to a particular class of people (namely, chiefs). The logical exclusion of alternative sources of authority and legitimacy makes especially problematic the task of mounting an effective political opposition, which in turn undermines efforts to develop more effective democratic political practices and institutions.

Traditionalism is a method of idealizing the past and of judging and molding the present by the assumed standards of a past era. The selective nature of representations of the past and the apparent ease with

which these selections can be made by those who command the requisite symbolic resources make it especially flexible in fashioning contemporary political agendas.[34] Although often camouflaged by a variety of romanticized images, traditionalism can operate at the crudest level of instrumental propaganda in seeking to legitimate some current state of affairs. And in those cases where political power is seen as the God-given right of an exclusive group who occupy the apex of the "natural order," the "invention" of a tradition that supports this order can readily be justified in its own terms. It is thus fitting to conclude with Orwell's observation on the nature of propaganda and historical revisionism:

> The primary aim of propaganda is, of course, to influence contemporary opinion, but those who rewrite history do probably believe with part of their minds that they are actually thrusting facts into the past. . . . More probably they feel that their own version *was* what happened in the sight of God, and that one is justified in re-arranging the records accordingly. (Orwell 1965:167)

NOTES

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1. "Tradition" is used in a broad sense here and incorporates kindred concepts such as "culture" or "custom." Its Latin root denotes several meanings that include the passing on of knowledge and doctrine from one generation to the next, and its general understanding in English is related to this process. See Williams 1976:268.

2. I shall not pursue this issue here but note in passing that it is all too easy to confuse substantive differences for those that are simply idiomatic. This point was made many years ago by Horton (1967:50).

3. This point is especially relevant to the idea of "ethno-Occidentalism," which concerns "essentialist renderings of the West by members of alien societies" (Carrier 1992:198).

4. However, as Clifford points out, an oppositional critique of "Orientalism" can scarcely avoid falling into "Occidentalism" (1988:258). Carrier describes Occidentalism in terms of an "essentialist rendering of the West by Westerners" (1992:197), but there is no reason to suppose that an equally essentialist view of the West cannot also be constructed by non-Westerners.

5. Cf. the point made by Carrier that the two essentializations of Orientalism and Occidentalism define two ends of an evolutionary continuum and, equally, define each other dialectically because they are generated as opposites of each other (1992: 197).

6. I might add that a local news program in the New England area of Australia in 1991 showed the congregation of a country church praying for rain on behalf of the farmers of the district. We can hardly claim that the character of the Hopi activities differs significantly from that of some elements of the so-called modern (Western) society that inhabits the northern slopes and plains of New South Wales. The difference here seems to be largely one of idiom.

7. Contemporary literature on Third World development--or underdevelopment--is replete with critiques of modernization theory, but for a conservative account that deals explicitly with the notion of tradition and the "rationalism" of modernization theory, see Shils 1981.

8. Cf. Hayek 1973, especially pp. 8-34.

9. Cf. Kaplan 1989:349-371. Kaplan notes that for Fiji's first governor, Sir Arthur Gordon, the chiefly system had a moral resonance as an ordering system.

10. For a critical discussion on the attempted transformation of custom to legal creed in a Melanesian context, see Aleck 1990.

11. For a partial critique of this phenomenon, see Magno 1987:30.

12. Judgments about what is "best" and "worst" are obviously problematic, being ultimately colored by the vantage point of the observer, whether an "insider" or an "outsider." But again, a surrender to relativism means that nothing can be said at all. For a critical discussion on the postmodernist promotion of culture-centric analysis and its relativistic implications, see Friedman 1987:161-170. Issues of this kind have a number of implications for ethical relativism, especially with respect to democratic theory and practice, but they are beyond the scope of the present article, and so it must suffice to emphasize the importance of maintaining a sharp edge to our critical faculties lest we become "anthropologists."

13. See also the introduction in Tonkin, McDonald, and Chapman 1989, where it is suggested that oppositions between fact and fiction, history and myth, reality and symbol, and so forth, have just about reached the end of their useful analytic life (1989:9-11).

14. See, for example, Douglas 1979, where it is specified that "traditional" refers to "pre-European contact" (p. 2n).

15. As Linnekin notes, this thesis implies also that change and innovation in Pacific societies originated only after European contact (1991:10).

16. Cf. Aleck: "For the purposes of contrasting law and custom in Papua New Guinea, Western law (that is to say, the introduced and adopted Anglo-Australian common law) is typically understood and represented in dichotomous formulations as the complete inversion of virtually all features by which Melanesian custom is generally characterized' (1990:51). See also Keesing 1990b: "[Reified culture] provides an ideal rhetorical instrument for claims to identity, phrased in opposition to modernity, Westernization, or neocolonialism" (p. 14). Manifestations of this phenomenon are also evident in anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism, where contemporary conditions of degradation are viewed as

corruptions of an "original cultural essence" that can only be retrieved by "a return to the pristine beginnings which reside in the early years of Islam" (Al-Azmeh 1991:471).

17. This refers to the title of one of Roger Keesing's papers, "The Past in the Present: Contested Representations of Culture and History" (1990a).

18. Acton says: "The supporters of tradition have believed in a 'natural' order of society to which men should piously conform" (1952: 1). But Acton is really referring to "traditionalism" in the sense described earlier.

19. Williams suggests that although it may only take, say, two generations to make something traditional and that this time frame accords with the sense of tradition as an active process, the word "tradition" nonetheless "moves again and again towards the *age-old* and towards ceremony, duty and respect" (1976:268-269). This movement underscores the ideological dimension that lends it its exhortatory or ratifying use.

20. First formulated by J. S. Furnivall, especially in Furnivall 1948.

21. Plural society theory also implicitly endorses the Romantic view of cultural uniqueness (as opposed to the Enlightenment conception of a universal reason), which also accords with Johann Herder's idea of the radical disjunction between culturally constituted worlds of meaning (Larsen 1987:2).

22. This interpretation forms the basis of Deryck Scarr's (1988) analysis and echoes coup leader Rabuka's own justification, which has been set out in a semibiographical account by Dean and Ritova (1988). However, it has been largely rejected in most other analyses, which include Lal 1988, Robertson and Tamanisau 1988, Norton 1990, Howard 1991, and Lawson 1991.

23. It is a commonplace observation that the hereditary position of a chief is especially privileged when it comes to the interpretation of tradition and customary matters (Hamnett 1975:15).

24. The sociopolitical typology based on the Polynesia-Melanesia division was first set out explicitly by Sahlins (1963). It has since been criticized on a number of grounds. See, for example, Thomas 1989 and the *Current Anthropology* discussion that follows. Marcus sets up a "kingly/populist continuum" for Polynesian chieftainship, which he says "effectively collapses the chief/bigman distinction used by Sahlins" (1989: 180). Despite these criticisms, the basic distinction between political types remains useful to the analysis of politics in Fiji (Lawson 1990, esp. 801-802).

25. This accords with Martha Kaplan's observation that "custom" in Fiji has come to be defined in terms of chiefly rule (1989:364).

26. This is a central theme in Said 1978. However, see note 4 above.

27. In another South Pacific study, Hanson develops a similar theme: "The present image [of Maori culture] has been invented for the purpose of enhancing the power of Maoris in New Zealand society, and is largely composed of those Maori qualities that can be attractively contrasted with the least desirable aspects of Pakeha culture" (1989:897). There are no grounds for believing, however, that this practice is unique to contemporary non-Western contexts. Collingwood records, for example, the circumspection of Vico of Naples, who long ago noted the prejudice and "conceit of nations" in generating "magnificent opinions concerning antiquity" and the inclination to recall only favorable histories. Col-

lingwood adds caustically that English histories written by and for English people "do not enlarge on military failures" (1961:68).

28. This general process is another form of dichotomization and a prime example of the type objected to by Gould and others.

29. This discussion should not be taken to imply that some Fiji Indian political leaders and many Fiji Indians generally have not likewise resorted to stereotypical exercises in defining themselves in opposition to indigenous Fijians.

30. Ironically, this practice accords with a particular anthropological tendency to treat cultures as wholes. See Goldsmith 1990:6.

31. This argument is elaborated in greater detail in Lawson 1991, especially chapter 1, and Lawson 1993.

32. This has been achieved through a variety of mechanisms. including the rigid allocation of communal seats, discriminating against Fiji Indians, as well as gross malapportionment within Fijian constituencies designed to bolster the support of the eastern chiefly establishment at the expense of the majority of "commoner" Fijians. For further details, see Lawson 1992.

33. These arguments appear throughout Dean and Ritova 1988.

34. This observation has been made in similar terms by Linnekin 1991:6.

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