CHIEFLY POLITICS IN THE FIRST REACTIONS IN RAKIRAKI TO THE MAY 2000 COUP IN FIJI

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This essay describes the rationale behind local leaders' scramble to respond to unfolding reactions to the coup in Fiji. Once word spread across the countryside that there had been a takeover of Parliament, people felt an immediate sense that the country was undergoing "another coup." This perception created a need to assimilate the events in terms of prevailing political orientations. In Rakiraki, the Tui Navitilevu made a widely publicized pronouncement of support that provoked a hurried attempt to contain reactions from other high-status figures in the area. The incident brought out into the open the usually submerged conflicts over legitimate chiefly status in the Rakiraki area.

ONE OF THE STRIKING THINGS about the 2000 coup in Fiji, especially to those with only a passing familiarity with the issues, is the fact that even with the attackers arrested for treason and order restored to the scene of the kidnaping, the prior government was not returned to power. The aims of the perpetrators were denounced, yet many of their demands—that an interim government be established, that the 1997 Constitution be scrapped and reinvented—were pursued with vigor. It seemed almost as if in being arrested Speight and company had won.

The fact is that events played out that way because the coup set in motion a process of yet again reconsidering the fundamental questions of race relations and political representation in the country. It is as if this process were the inevitable by-product of a need to respond to a crisis suffused with the stark racial rhetoric of the coup leaders. The many political complexities of the situation continue to confound Western observers, but it does seem to

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be clear that the coup worked as a catalyst, forcing out into the open once again anxieties and fears that had been in the shadows for some time. In the past, such events have proved to offer opportunities for developing new paradigms that accommodate the realities of ethnic opposition. Robert Norton has observed that "Fiji's modern political history has been marked by a recurring pattern of crisis and conciliation: crises that while accentuating ethnic conflict, have also presented new contexts for dialogue and accommodation" (2000:111). As of this writing, with the new elections in August 2001 revealing a starkly polarized nation and with the elected Qarase government refusing to honor the 1997 Constitution's requirement that cabinet seats go to strong opposition parties—in this case the Indian-dominated Fiji Labour Party—any healing accommodation is yet to materialize.

The driving conflicts are among indigenous Fijians themselves over their vision for the future of the country. Scholars have argued that the priority of ethnic Fijian discourse has been in place since the coups of 1987—events that "took away the Other against which Fijian identity had been dialectically shaped by racial politics" and established a new frame by which "the contest over 'the nation' would be de-centered, resurfacing within the Fijian community itself" (Rutz 1995:75). Significant regional and class differences among indigenous Fijians have produced competing visions for the nation, and how those conflicts play out will significantly affect the nation's future. A clearer understanding of the range of cultural factors varying across regions can help to build an analytical framework for seeing what has already happened and for anticipating what is to come. For this reason, a study of different local responses to the coup attempt in May 2000 may offer clues to the relevant underlying cultural patterns that vary from region to region.

A central issue—perhaps the central issue—is the role of "tradition" in imagining Fijian identity, and integral to that is an appraisal of the place of chiefs. In many Pacific societies chiefs stand as universal symbols of "tradition" and "custom" (White 1992:75) while occupying pivotal roles in regional politics. Stephanie Lawson argues that "the political salience of issues concerning chiefly status in Fiji achieved special prominence after the military coup of 1987.... Chiefliness was promoted emphatically as the authentic expression of Fijian 'tradition'" (1997:109). During the crisis in 2000 the country looked to the Great Council of Chiefs for guidance on how to deal with George Speight's actions, and individual chiefs had to decide where they stood on the issue of Speight's calls for indigenous Fijian paramountcy. Behind each chief's decision lurked a host of political tensions in his home region, tensions not only over relations between Indians and Fijians, but also over the very role chiefs should play in national politics. Lamont Lindstrom

and Geoffrey White have argued, in fact, that throughout the Pacific "the status and power of the chief have become public issues" such that in "a general strategy for the comparative study of political culture in the Pacific" researchers should by "looking to the margins and boundaries of the state . . . find critical events that offer strategic sites of investigation." In these local and marginal contexts, they claim, "chiefs are central actors in the dramas of political transformation" (Lindstrom and White 1997:4). Applying such an approach in Fiji means addressing different regional paradigms for the role of chiefs in contemporary national politics.

This essay outlines some central themes in tensions over chiefs' playing politics in the Rakiraki area of the northeastern portion of Ra Province on Viti Levu in Fiji. In Rakiraki, as likely elsewhere in the country, the May 2000 coup brought divisions out into the open as leaders scrambled to respond to unfolding reactions. In so doing they had to acknowledge some conflicts that had previously been hidden under the cloak of decorum. It was not just political allegiances that were at issue. People had to take a stand on what role high chiefs should play in the sometimes unseemly realm of politics, on what place race had in the definition of the nation, and ultimately on where lay the core of "Fijian" ethnic identity. While it was easy to get caught up in the fervor over the image of a new powerful Fijian (see Brison's contribution to this issue), and while it seemed safe to rally around a prominent regional chief's declaration of support for the coup, the reality was that for local leaders the developments raised a host of problems that would have to be addressed in an unusually open and contentious manner.

The central problem was the Tui Navitilevu's public declaration in Suva, on May 21, two days after the coup, that he supported the abrogation of the 1997 Constitution and that there might well be civil war should President Ratu Mara try to interfere by force. He concluded, "We the *taukei* [indigenous Fijians] are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice so as to return this country to the *taukei.*" He made his speech in the context of an emergency meeting held by the Great Council of Chiefs to address the unfolding crisis, but his specific remarks, by deliberately invoking the will of indigenous Fijian landowners, spoke more to his recent appointment as titular head to a newly invigorated political Taukei Movement of radical indigenous Fijians from across the country.

At the time, Karen Brison and I were concluding ten months' ethnographic research in Rakiraki. We first heard about the Tui's statement on the morning of May 22, in an e-mail from Karen's father, who had forwarded to us an article from a newspaper in Toronto, Canada. The Tui Navitilevu's house stood some one hundred yards from our own in Rakiraki, and yet we

had to hear about this in an e-mail from overseas! The local television station had not covered the announcement, but it had been covered on radio. The problem raised by the Tui's statement was not so much its content, the statement of support for the coup; rather, it was the fact that it was the Tui Navitilevu, the most powerful local chief, who was making the declaration. His involvement suddenly implicated by association a host of other chiefs in Ra Province, and it placed the events under an aura of sanctity that suddenly made the usual political machinations uncomfortable. Later that morning we found out that soon after the Tui's statement a prominent Fijian businessman from Rakiraki had telephoned his brother in the village, stating that he was providing some money to buy kava to take around to the other Ra chiefs to present an apology for the Tui's having spoken for them without consulting them first. The businessman's brother, the one designated to take on this chore, was one of the Tui Navitilevu's closest friends and spokesmen. I accompanied him on his visits that day.

The Tui's statement and the subsequent actions in response point up the need to consider several cultural and structural factors that will have varying influences on local events depending on the region of the country in which they occur. First, there remain fundamental tensions over the role of sacred chiefs in the realm of politics. The 1987 coup and its aftermath produced a renewed emphasis on cultivating indigenous Fijian "tradition," and a more prominently political role for chiefs from across the country was one result. Lindstrom and White write that "the Great Council of chiefs found its powers considerably expanded in the aftermath of the military coups that invoked the protection of tradition as a major objective" (1997:14). But for many Fijians, there is real ambivalence over chiefs' widespread involvement in politics, for it is seen to take away from their role as sanctified custodians of tradition. Constructions that identify "tradition" with the chiefly elite and its prominent role in politics risk underestimating the persistent concern in some areas that by becoming politicians chiefs may sacrifice their sanctity. In the case of events in Rakiraki following the May 2000 coup attempt, the Tui Navitilevu's overtly political statements provoked disquiet that could only be addressed by a traditional ceremony of apology.

Second, there is the paramount political question of the future of the land tenure system that ensures that 83 percent of the land remain under ownership of indigenous Fijian *mataqali,* or clans. Before the May 2000 coup, there had been considerable anxiety in the Rakiraki area over the government's potential tampering with the land tenure system. While the pragmatic concerns about retaining land and lease money receipts from Indian tenants determine much of what is at stake, there is an ideological dimen-

sion to the system that defines Fijian-Indian relations according to what Norton calls a "*taukei-vulagi*" (owner-guest) rhetoric (2000:105). This rhetoric sees Indian presence in Fiji as part of a sacred contract with permanent conditions and broad implications for political relations. According to Norton, the concept of a *taukei-vulagi* partnership "gives cultural reinforcement to an inter-ethnic complementarity in Fiji's political economy" (2000:105). In a speech following his takeover in 1987, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka described Fiji's Indian population as "a gift from God to help us in the development of our country," part of a divine plan that requires continued formal generosity from the ethnic Fijians (cited in Norton 2000:105). It was over this issue of the definition of land relations that the Tui Navitilevu's double role as regional chief and political activist was most important. The Tui's dramatic defense in Suva of the status quo was not simply an announcement by an activist politician—he intended it as a statement of the sacred conditions of ethnic relations in Fiji, and he saw the Chaudhry government as threatening to transform those relations fundamentally. Analysis of the Tui's actions has to take into account their defense of a fundamental construction of ethnic relations that fortifies indigenous Fijians' sense of identity.

Finally, a third conceptual issue deals with the varying powers of chiefs in government across different areas of Fiji. Much has been written of a "tradition of western discontent" (Robertson and Tamanisau 1988:17) in Fiji over the dominance of eastern chiefly leaders in Fiji's politics. The small islands in the center and east of Fiji had strong stratified confederations that were instrumental in accepting British colonial rule, and up to the present the Fijian political leadership has been disproportionately from descendants of those high chiefs. Their political domination has, according to this view, provoked opposition from leaders in the west, which now dominates Fiji's commerce in tourism, mines, and sugarcane. Robertson and Tamanisau have argued that concern over western domination in the elected coalition provoked eastern leaders to back Sitiveni Rabuka in his 1987 overthrow of the elected government (1988). Nicholas Thomas has argued, though, that an east-west division obscures significant regional differences in priorities for protest against eastern political domination. He argues that analyses that describe "a persisting undercurrent of resistance neglect . . . the specific nature of the various protests" (Thomas 1990:132). In Thomas's view, a more fruitful approach will examine the specific political and historical conditions in different regions and their resulting mystifications of ethnic conflict.

These three conceptual themes, when considered together, help to create a regional portrait of the political tensions for the Rakiraki area in response to the May 2000 coup attempt.

Sacred Chiefs and Dirty Politics

The role of chiefs in Fijian politics has been a central topic for analysis by scholars attempting to explain the origins of political upheavals over the past two decades. One well-developed line of argument states that political conflict arises from western threats to the eastern chiefly elite's domination of political power. Stephanie Lawson, for example, argues that Fijian political history has been framed by a "myth of cultural homogeneity among Fijians" in which all of Fiji was supposedly subject to a "grand tradition of eastern chiefly power" (1996:39). Under this paradigm, "the structures and values surrounding chiefly power and privilege in the east have been promoted as the model of tradition for the whole of Fiji, despite the diversity of precolonial structures throughout the islands" (ibid.:38). This situation is the product of the long history of indirect rule by the British colonial administration through which "the mantle of eastern chiefly authority was extended over the entire island group" (ibid.:56). By the time of independence in 1970, political power of the ruling Alliance Party lay "firmly in the hands of eastern chiefs" (ibid.). The only "hiatus" in chiefly dominance lay during the short-lived Bavadra administration, which was overthrown by Rabuka's coup in 1987, an event that "almost certainly had the tacit, if not active, support of Fiji's leading establishment chiefs" (Lawson 1990:820). Similarly, William Sutherland has argued that "functionalist" explanations of Fijian political systems, focusing as they did on the way "chiefs provided protection and subjects reciprocated with deference and material tribute," missed the very dramatic "material basis for chiefly power" (1992:8). Materialist arguments at times even defined chiefly dominance in terms of class, so that Robertson and Taminisau (1988), for example, equate Fiji's "chiefly bureaucracy" with an upper class, seeing Rabuka as a pawn of the "ruling class" (see Ewins 1998b).

Other scholars have noted, though, that even with political domination by a chiefly elite from the east, there are cultural factors that mitigate their ultimate control. Glenn Petersen, for example, argues that an analysis like Lawson's focusing on eastern chiefly control "does not capture [Pacific Islands societies'] participatory character and . . . thus substantially exaggerates the authoritarian aspects of chieftainship" (2000:86). Traditional politics in states such as Fiji emerge from elaborate patterns of exchange and negotiation, and even the supposedly genealogical succession to a chiefly title is subject to considerable political manipulation by other than chiefly leaders. Petersen concludes that "Lawson makes the error of granting credence to post facto claims, which in fact tend to legitimize rather than pre-

scribe succession" (ibid.:87). Underlying a chief's power, then, is a participatory political process that can hold considerable contention and dispute.

Furthermore, the picture of chiefs maintaining political control under the mantle of tradition can obscure a persistent tension in the views of Fijians that, while chiefs should maintain an aura of sanctity in their control, politics itself is dirty business. With commoner Sitiveni Rabuka's successful leadership in national politics, the emergence of a politics run by Fijian commoners has strengthened that tension rather than undermining it; the aftermath of the 1987 coups in fact shifted the role of chiefs more toward sanctifying and moderating policies pushed by others. Thus, Norton has argued that there is a "paradoxical duality" in the role of chiefs that has not been appreciated by writers emphasizing chiefs' pursuit of vested elite interests—namely, that chiefs' self-interested pursuits are tempered by a strong role as "conciliators" in ethnic relations because of their sacred charter (2000:108). Norton describes this side of the chiefs' role as "a symbolic and legitimating one rather than one of political power" (ibid.:113). Chiefly participation in politics, especially at the local level, can interfere with chiefs' sacred duty to the community.

The tension between a chief's sacred duty and the pragmatics of personal politics can be seen in statements by Fijian scholars and commentators about the nature of leadership in Fiji. Tupeni Baba, education professor, Labour Party founder, and Chaudhry government Fijian deputy prime minister, describes the problems that arise from a chief's public declaration of a particular political allegiance, the very thing done by the Tui Navitilevu in May 2000. Baba argues that such actions point directly to a conflict between politics and the traditional position of chiefs:

> The involvement of chiefs in traditional politics has been very much part of their lives as they try to meet the need of their people as well as maintain their own positions. This is very different from publicly endorsing a particular political party, however. . . . The very act of publicly endorsing a particular political party . . . immediately alienates them from those of their people who do not subscribe to these political . . . parties or groups. Such an act is in direct conflict with the traditional role of chiefs as a uniting force in Fijian society. (1997:142)

Baba's point is that political positions are inherently partisan, and by taking strong positions chiefs risk sacrificing their position as sacred figures capable of promoting unity in the Fijian community. Rory Ewins, in his book on

contemporary politics in Fiji and Tonga (1998a), interviewed a range of public figures on their views of politics, and several in Fiji voiced views similar to those expressed by Deputy Prime Minister Baba. Here is a sampling of the comments Ewins presents:

> I think that the Council of Chiefs should be above politics. It should be like it was in the past: that it gives its blessings to all Fijian political parties. . . . Because then it retains its supremacy, rather than coming down to the level of politics. (Government minister, cited in Ewins 1998a:77)

> It's good to have the Great Council of Chiefs, but they should not interfere with politics. They should be above politics. . . . If the Great Council of Chiefs plays party politics . . . if we have problems there, we can't go anywhere else. So we fight among ourselves. (Government minister, cited in ibid.:77)

> Before [Fiji] had the Great Council of Chiefs hanging around and [not interfering]; that's the way it should be. That way people . . . will be happy with the chiefs and will happily go about doing commerce, and [will] happily be Fijian. (Civil servant, cited in ibid.:78)

Underlying such comments is the assumption that "politics" is an endeavor that is inherently partisan and confrontational, and it is an endeavor associated with a leadership style from Western societies. By contrast, a Fijian's chiefly duty is to provide unity in promoting a communal Fijian tradition that holds sober and mutually respectful relations among people as its hallmark.

It was just such a tension over the political role of a contemporary chief that prompted local Rakiraki leaders to feel that they had to scramble to preserve a Fijian respectful decorum in the wake of the Tui Navitilevu's public comments following George Speight's takeover of Parliament in May 2000. The Tui's political involvement was not a big surprise. His own political ambitions were well known—he had, in the last election, run unsuccessfully as a Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) candidate for an open seat. And more recently, just a couple months before the 2000 coup, the Tui Navitilevu had been chosen as titular head of the Taukei Movement, a grass-roots pro-Fijian organization that had considerable prominence in the years following the earlier 1987 coups but in recent years had been relatively insignificant. But his announcement in May was a declaration that

went well beyond his own personal position on the issues; there was suddenly now the prospect that he was speaking on behalf of Ra Province in general, and it was that implication that our hurried visits to local chiefs were designed to negate. What was at issue, ultimately, was a sacred chief's role of speaking for the people when in fact this particular chief was speaking as a politician. The response to our visit to make amends, especially from one young Ra chief, revealed the underlying cultural problem with this situation.

The Tui Navitilevu's political involvement had for some time raised questions among local leaders over whether it was appropriate for him to be involved in politics in this way, first as a candidate for the open SVT position and then later as head of the Taukei Movement. Views along the lines of the statements cited above were also expressed to me by a prominent Rakiraki business leader and government official, the same man who had telephoned from Suva just after the Tui's public statement of support of the coup, calling for a round of apologies and promising to supply the funds for the kava presentations. In an interview with me some three months before the coup, he had expressed some concerns over his friend the Tui Navitilevu's interest in politics. He argued that the Tui's proper role was as steward of tradition *(vanua)* and that he was tarnishing himself by meddling in politics. He told me that on his last trip to the village he had sat down to breakfast with the Tui Navitilevu before heading off to a meeting of the SVT party:

> And that's when we really started to talk about some real issues. And it was good, because [he] was going in different directions, talking about the politics and SVT and his part in that, and I said, "Look—go home"—because they were having a meeting today, as I said—"You have to forget about politics and get the *vanua* and the people, the traditional [way], the chiefs and the leaders together so they can [work with] the people—provide real leadership in the village, in the *vanua*." That's really what I said.

In his view, the Tui's involvement in SVT politics was distracting him from his true role as the spiritual leader of the people. He went on to say that many chiefs had become "confused" by the extent of recent changes and that young people were hearing ideas from the outside world: "They bring in new concepts and they're starting—slowly—they're losing the sort of respect for the *vanua,* for the chiefs." The Tui Navitilevu's political ambitions were, in his mind, interfering with his ability to exercise the kind of leadership that was truly needed.

Safeguarding the Sacred Land

The Rakiraki leader and I had the conversation about the Tui's politics some six weeks before the Tui further deepened his involvement by agreeing to serve as "president" of the national Taukei Movement during a rally in Lautoka. It was at that rally that the Tui Navitilevu outlined his view of the issues confronting the Ra people. In so doing, he identified a second set of themes, those dealing with the spiritual significance of the land. The strategic importance of the land issue and its symbolic association with Fijian identity for ethnic Fijians in this part of the country would play an even more significant role in the events in Rakiraki following the coup. In Fijian cultural ideology the control of land remains central to one's sense of identity as a Fijian. The term for land, *vanua,* has a broad array of "physical, social and cultural connotations" such that the word "embodies the values and beliefs which people of a particular locality have in common. It includes their philosophy of living, and their beliefs about life in this world and in the supernatural world . . . it is the totality of a Fijian community" (Ravuvu 1987:14–15). R. Gerald Ward has emphasized that Fijian concepts of the land are so inextricably tied up with their "Fijianness" that "the retention of an unreal ideal of native land tenure is now a basic component of the creation and maintenance of Fijian identity. . . . The inalienable control of land has become an icon of ethnic distinctiveness" (1996:199).

In political terms, it is the preservation of the chiefly structure that is seen to protect the land tenure system in Fiji. Lawson has pointed out that identifying "the inseparable link" between the chiefs and the land had been a prominent point in the discourse justifying the coup of 1987. The discourse suggested that "in the absence of a strong working chiefly system, indigenous Fijians would lose all their important rights, especially in relation to the land, and therefore virtually cease to exist as a unique community" (Lawson 1996:50). A corollary to such a view states that it is part of the chief's duty to defend the current land tenure system as an essential component of contemporary Fijian identity. Traditionally, that duty has centered on equitably distributing money from land leases and presiding over formal ceremonies dealing with affairs of the *vanua.* But with the recent perceived threat to the land tenure system posed by the rising political influence of Fiji Indians, a new potential political role has emerged for chiefs, and this new role contributes to the potential conflict over what constitutes a chief's sacred duty. Events surrounding the Tui Navitilevu in the weeks before the May 2000 coup illustrate how it came to be that he found himself in a difficult situation as both chief and politician.

In March 2000, the Tui Navitilevu, along with all the other regional

chiefs, had been asked to attend a rally of the newly emerged Taukei Movement to show his support for their protests over the Chaudhry government's incipient policy changes regarding land leases by Fiji Indians. Some chiefs sent representatives, but the Tui Navitilevu was the only chief who chose to attend in person. I drove him to the rally that day, thinking this would be a good event to attend. None of us anticipated what was to happen. Following their march through the town that day, the Taukei Movement leaders asked for a private session with the Tui, and they soon after emerged, declaring that the Tui Navitilevu had agreed to serve as president of the Taukei Movement. The Tui later told me that he had been utterly surprised by the invitation. It seemed clear that the movement leaders had seized upon an opportunity. By agreeing to serve as their president, the Tui would be casting an aura of chiefly legitimacy to the aims of the movement. At the ensuing kava ceremony honoring the Tui's decision, the speeches' rhetoric highlighted the link between the tradition of chiefly guidance in Fijian identity and the need to preserve the sanctity of the *vanua*—meant literally here as "the land"—that is, the sanctity of Fijian control over land. In accepting his new role the Tui Navitilevu announced:

> You see here in just one very short time, inside just eleven months [since Chaudhry's election], you see that the *vanua* [land] has gone to the government. . . . Yes, for me the first thing coming into my thoughts is that perhaps it is the wish of the Lord here, about the things that have been done by the government at this time today, that we the descendants of the owners, that it is right that we should wake up and we should not be careless about our land; we should try to prevent the government here from grabbing our wealth from us, our heritage, our money. My prayer is that we should work together, the owners, at this time today.

The announcement was a plea for chiefly leaders to "wake up" and become involved in land politics on a different level from what they had authorized in the past. The Tui was himself taking a relatively radical position in declaring his intention to work directly, as a chief, to prevent land reform. And he was the only chief placing himself in this position. His characterization of unfolding events as all a part of God's plan sought to link together a religious basis for the current land tenure system and his own position as sacred leader in defending Fijian identity. But at the same time he had identified himself with a radical political movement that would not hesitate to upset the status quo.

A related set of themes, having to do with the role of western Fiji as a pri-

mary site for development, was also articulated at that meeting with the leaders of the Taukei Movement. A representative for one of the chiefs from the Lautoka area, in accepting the *sevusevu,* ceremonial kava, emphasized that the government and the rest of the country of Fiji were becoming wealthy owing to productive commerce in the west:

> It is like it's the words already used, we come sit today from the west in our land, the land that enriches the government of Fiji and enables the money to come, and also the airport, the gold mine, the sugar mills, many big hotels, yes when they want to grab our soil, we have to come together, the high chiefs, come sit this day today to do our duty. We thank you very much. You our children, you are running our movement, thank you very much.

This theme emphasized the idea that much of what went on in Fijian national politics was driven by the interests of outsiders, whether they be Fiji Indians or a government dominated by leaders from the east. The implication was that the country was entering a new era, where tourism, gold, and sugar should occupy a stronger place in determining policies of the nation. The problem was that some of these interests would not benefit at all from any illegitimate appropriation of government power. By agreeing to take such a prominent role in the Taukei Movement, the Tui Navitilevu was placing himself as a hard-liner on a range of issues over which there was no consensus. He risked flouting chiefly sanctity by becoming mired in a grassroots movement, he made claims about the sacred position of the land as the linchpin for ethnic Fijian politics, and he tried to establish the position that it was the sacred duty of westerners to protect their interests against a national government.

Chiefly Hierarchy and Landed Prosperity in the West

Statements at the rally of the Taukei Movement in Lautoka spoke to a long history of resentment in the west over the long-standing eastern domination of national politics in Fiji. The situation had become especially galling with the emerging economic prosperity of the western provinces. But the distinctive regional situation in Rakiraki and the surrounding northeastern section of Viti Levu Island requires consideration of a different dimension of eastern historical dominance—the exportation of a chiefly hierarchical structure that was never a part of the local social paradigm. Martha Kaplan has outlined a careful delineation of competing historical visions of the role of chiefs in the Rakiraki area. The first, promulgated by the confederation

on Bau Island to the east and supported by Fijians across the country, conceptualized the chief as a stranger who, as "a living instantiation of the founding god of the people," presided over the process of chiefly succession for the lower divisions (Kaplan 1995:27). In this view, "a chief was (and is) made *(veibuli)* in a ritual process that conceives him first as a dangerous outsider who marries into a line of autochthonous people. He is ritually murdered in the installation ritual, and is reborn as their god. The chiefly line is therefore a synthesis of outsider and autochthon, or chief and land of the people. The chief is called child chief *(gone turaga)*" (ibid.). Kaplan describes how anthropologist A. M. Hocart's description of the installation of the Tui Navitilevu in Rakiraki in 1912 reflected this conceptualization of the chiefly role, with the people of the land bestowing his title and his subsequent trips along the coast designating who was to be chief in the other communities in the area. In this construction the chief "is . . . regarded as creating and authorizing the heads of the divisions" (ibid.).

Kaplan goes on to argue, though, that another competing vision of the position of chiefs had existed locally, centered among the people actually living on the land in this portion of Viti Levu Island. In this view, the *itaukei,* the owners of the land, were actually the ones who "authorized and controlled chiefly rule with their own complementary authority" by virtue of their special relationship, as landowners, to the gods of the land. In this view the people doing the installation "'made' the chief in installation rituals," that is, because "the original Fijians sprang from the soil itself. . . [a] stranger chief may arrive among them and marry the local woman, but the emphasis in the story is on how the local people meet and choose to install the stranger as chief" (Kaplan 1995:28). Kaplan argues that an appreciation of these two competing visions of chiefly status, one imported from the eastern and coastal areas, and the other local to the hinterland interior peoples, is essential to the understanding of political developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In 1999 and 2000 the Rakiraki people still spoke of the Tui Navitilevu as a regional chief who controlled forty-two villages from the town of Tavua in the west to Viti Levu Bay in the east. This vision of the Tui's influence matches the conception, inherited from Bauan views of regional chiefly control, of the Tui Navitilevu as the dominant regional chief. But the actual amount of land directly under his control was relatively small compared to that of some of the other chiefs in the area, particularly those with land in the interior. So there remained an open question about the true extent of this particular Tui's sacred charter. With his recent active political ambitions, most recently centered on the Taukei Movement and its claim to defend the sacred charter of the land, there was a considerable potential for taking

offense at the remarks he made in Suva in the days following the coup. Thus all the themes discussed here—the potential conflict over a chief's playing politics, the tension over the future of Fijian land, and the competing visions of the Tui Navitilevu's true status as chief for the region—played into the decision to send out the Tui's spokesmen to ask for forgiveness over his remarks. Some of the reactions to that effort underscored the significance of just those themes.

So, armed with kava prestations purchased with money wired by the Rakiraki official in Suva, we set out to announce our apologies on behalf of the Tui. The business leader who had suggested the apology asked his elder brother to serve as the Tui's spokeman. I accompanied this man as he visited three chiefs in the area. He explained through a traditional kava ceremony *(sevusevu)* that he was apologizing for the Tui Navitilevu's having spoken on behalf of all of Ra Province in stating his support for the coup. Two of the three chiefs we visited on that day accepted the kava on behalf of the Tui Navitilevu without any overt expression of disquiet over what had transpired.

The third chief we visited, a younger man with influence over a wide area of land in the interior, through his response to the apology revealed the tremendous discomfort created by the Tui's actions over the previous year. We encountered this chief not at his home but on the highway as he headed home from a morning of shopping. From the moment we approached him, it was clear that he was not particularly interested in receiving any symbol of apology from the Tui Navitilevu. He finally agreed to host us at his home, protesting repeatedly that he had no need for any apology from the Tui Navitilevu. The refrain he used repeatedly in English was "I support the Tui Navitilevu! You people in Rakiraki are nothing! You have no land! I have land!" Once we had settled in to do the presentation of the kava, he had an argument with his spokesman over whether he would himself speak over the kava after receiving it. It was clear that he had no interest in following the decorum of kava presentations, that there was no legitimacy to the apology being offered, and that he wanted therefore the opportunity simply to speak for himself. We began, with the business leader's brother presenting, addressing the chief with a tie of kinship:

> We two come here just on behalf of our people of Navuavua. This kava is just offered from your "father" in Suva. I believe that you heard the words of [the Tui Navitilevu] on the radio. The two of us were not sent from the people or from [the Tui]; we just discussed it in the night with your "father" from Suva who thought that we should come to show this kava and ask that you forgive the things

> heard on the radio, his words, those of [the Tui Navitilevu] in the evening. We ask that our relationship be strong, for politics is just politics.

The attempt was to position the Tui's statements as mere "politics," that it should not affect the sacred relationships among the chiefs or between chiefs and their people. After a perfunctory acceptance by the spokesman reaffirming the ties of kinship, the chief himself broke in, talking about the violence in Rakiraki following the coup and reiterating that there had been no need for this presentation, that he supported the Tui Navitilevu but that the Rakiraki people had nothing. Then he focused squarely on me, asking me, in English, "Do YOU support the Tui Navitilevu? Do you support him?" My companion tried to explain that I would be leaving in a week in any case, but I suddenly felt directly some of the implications of having to cast one's support fully behind what the Tui Navitilevu had been doing. I felt acutely uncomfortable, and since he was clearly not going to let me go without answering, I mumbled something about supporting the cause so as to sidestep any statement about the legitimacy of Speight's actions.

I cannot emphasize enough how, in spite of performing the *sevusevu*, we were engaging in a style of interaction that was unusual. It was clear to me that this chief had found himself under strong pressure by the Tui Navitilevu's actions to state his position. And in fact, on the following day, after the emergency meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs, the radio reported that this same chief had in fact denounced the coup, declaring that he "fully supported" President Mara and that the Tui Navitilevu didn't have the backing of the people because he had lost an election the year before anyway. For me, this announcement placed the chief's comments of the previous day in a new light. I suspected that he had not changed his mind overnight or been influenced by the positions of his fellow chiefs. Nor could I accept that he was being disingenuous in his declarations to us on the previous day that he "supported" the Tui Navitilevu. So I had to find a way to interpret his statements and behavior as refracted through the political realities of the moment. Of relevance were the Tui's Navitilevu's political positioning and the immediate prospects offered by the coup.

It was clear that the chief's statements and reluctance to accept the kava came from a refusal to accept our Rakiraki contingent as a legitimate group to be issuing apology on the Tui's behalf. In his understanding the people from Rakiraki had forfeited any claim to being the people of the Tui Navitilevu when they had failed to get him elected the previous year. The implication of "you Rakiraki are nothing" and "you have no land" seemed to be that the people in Rakiraki, by failing to support the Tui Navitilevu, had

shown themselves to have insufficient dedication to the power of the land issue, perhaps because they did not have enough land to consider it important. This sarcastic assessment carried with it the sense that, by not having appreciation for the sacred "land," the Rakiraki people were forfeiting any claims to being true ethnic Fijians. Any *sevusevu* from Rakiraki, the implication went, had no real basis. This was an emotional statement by someone clearly bothered by being placed in the position chosen for him by those who wanted to issue their apology.

The real peculiarity had to do with his statement of "support" for the Tui Navitilevu coupled with his public announcement the next day that he did not support the coup. His statement of support, spoken several times, had always come at the head of a series of declarations, in an irritated tone: "I support the Tui Navitilevu, you in Rakiraki are nothing, you have no land, I have land." It seemed clear that he was declaring support for the notion that the land is what is sacred, that in supporting the Tui Navitilevu, he was supporting the claim that land was paramount. He was supporting the Tui only in the most abstract sense—as protector of the land, the sacred Tui should be supported, just as he himself, with even more land, should be supported as protector as well. His perspective followed the model Kaplan describes for the hinterland peoples of this part of Viti Levu Island. While the Tui had status as a regional chief of considerable influence, the reasoning goes, ultimate authority comes from the sacredness of the land itself, not from any intrinsic qualities of the chief. The chief who truly has land, unlike the Tui Navitilevu and his Rakiraki supporters, is the one who should be in the position of making pronouncements on the future of the Fijian government and its ties to the land. Even as he declared his support for what the Tui Navitilevu represented, he had managed to convey disdain for what the Tui and his illegitimate Rakiraki apologists were doing. It may well have been that he harbored no strong feelings against the Tui himself, but he clearly resented how the recent unfolding of events was drawing him into a kind of political activity that chiefs should stay above.

Thus, a look at the contours of a relatively insignificant sequence of regional events reveals some significant points to consider as the nation considers its political future. Regional differences in ideology and economic circumstances significantly affect the character of the debate over ethnic Fijian control in contemporary politics. Despite a long history of political dominance by the chiefly elite, the long-standing sacred charter chiefs hold as protectors of the *vanua* can run up against the political maneuvering of the individual men holding the chiefly titles. The "paradoxical duality," as Norton calls it (2000:108), of chiefly participation in party politics can result

in a tempering of political action, but it can also result in a significant compromise of chiefly influence in one's home area. Regional tensions over the sources of chiefly sacred power may further complicate a given chief's capacity to speak on behalf of the people. All of these issues underscore the extent to which an ideology of Fijian political authority, linked as it is to understandings of the sacred character of the land and to the very concepts of Fijian identity through chiefly representatives, drives the political process.

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