

DISJUNCTURES IN DISCOURSE: EMERGING IDENTITIES AFTER THE 2000 COUP IN RAKIRAKI, FIJI

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This essay examines the way the coup of 2000 crystallized a new ethnic identity among Rakiraki villagers based on opposition to dominant groups within the Fijian ethnic community. The most obvious source of support for the coup was fear and resentment of Indo-Fijians, and it was evident that the coup both drew on and catalyzed such resentments. However, listening to villagers' reactions convinced me that they also supported the coup because they saw it as an attempt by a western Fijian (Speight, whose mother was rumored to be a Ra woman) to overthrow a Bauan-Lauan monopoly on government power, as represented by Ratu Mara. Villagers resented Ratu Mara's attempts to stop the coup and commented that he was more European than Fijian. They embraced Speight as a true Fijian son who exhibited qualities of strength thought to be central to Fijian identity. The essay suggests that, at least in the west, the coup increased existing resentment of the national chiefly structure and strengthened local identities within the Fijian community.

I HAD A STRONG SENSE of déjà vu during a recent reading of *Islands, Islanders and the World*. Bayliss-Smith, Bedford, Brookfield, and Latham, who had completed the manuscript just before the 1987 Fiji coup, pondered their inability to see the coup coming. After the coup, those who "knew" Fiji all said that a coup against a government elected largely through Indo-Fijian support was inevitable (Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:6). Yet the authors, in the course of studying economic enterprise in Fiji's eastern islands, had been more struck by divisions between an indigenous Fijian elite and commoners of the same community than they had by ethnic tensions. "The expatriate cannot really grasp the inner workings and nuances of indigenous soci-

eties," a Fijian colleague suggested. "This leads in many cases to a patterned and artificial set of behaviour by many Melanesians in the presence of expatriates, in contrast to the more casual and more real responses in the company of familiar local people" (Lasaqa 1973:309–310, quoted in Bayliss-Smith et al. 1988:6–7). While Bayliss-Smith et al. acknowledge the limitations of an outsider's ability to penetrate local states of mind, they suggest that their own failure to predict the coup stemmed at least in part from "unresolved contradictions" in local attitudes (1988:10). Fijian society, they argue, is characterized by "a complex and changing play of contradictions, in which allegiance and rebellion, ethnic confrontation and cordial interdependence, traditionalism and modernity, clan and class, east and west within the nation all have their parts." As a result, they suggest that "Fijians . . . could not themselves have predicted how they would respond to the pressures of April and May 1987, still less tell us" (*ibid.*).

My own reaction to the May 2000 coup, which occurred during the last week of a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Rakiraki, Fiji,¹ paralleled that of Bayliss-Smith and company. Like them, I was unprepared for the Rakiraki villagers to rally solidly behind Speight even though hindsight and investigation of the scholarship on the region strongly pointed to the inevitability of the villagers' reaction. I wondered if my failure to anticipate Rakiraki reactions to the 2000 coup stemmed from my inability as an outsider to penetrate the surface of village life. Rakiraki villagers were obviously concerned with the image they projected to the outside world, and there was clearly much that they had not told me.

In this essay, however, I will argue, with Bayliss-Smith et al., that while there was much that I missed in the months leading up to the coup, there was ample evidence that Rakiraki villagers had complex views about national politics and that, in fact, their reaction to the coup had been somewhat unpredictable, perhaps even to themselves. At a moment when indigenous Fijian identity appears to have solidified in opposition to Indo-Fijians, I suggest that such attitudes were by no means inevitable, nor will they inevitably continue in the future. Rakiraki villagers did display deep-seated distrust of Indo-Fijians. Yet many villagers had been willing to tolerate the presence of a democratically elected Indo-Fijian prime minister for almost a year before the coup. Moreover, Rakiraki villagers had entertained many ways of "imagining" their nation in the year before the coup other than as an indigenous polity to be defended from foreign "guests." In some contexts, villagers saw indigenous Fijians as a cohesive group of "host" people with a sacred relationship to the land. They saw this host group as under siege by a crafty, manipulative, Indo-Fijian community intent on wresting economic and political power away from the indigenous Fijians. But on many occasions,

Rakiraki villagers were more concerned with their relationship with other groups within the indigenous Fijian community than with Indo-Fijians. Villagers spoke resentfully of people from the southeast of Viti Levu and from Lau who monopolized bureaucracy and government and who claimed superiority over the western sugar-producing regions of Viti Levu. In still other contexts, many villagers, particularly those who were younger and who worked for wages outside the village, spoke of themselves as part of an international community united by religion and/or economy. In this mode, villagers argued that ethnicity should make no difference in politics and that the national focus should be on promoting development within Fiji. Villagers also disagreed on the role of the traditional Fijian *vanua* and their chiefly leaders in the larger nation. Some people argued that chiefs, as the head of sacred *vanua*, should have a strong role in politics, while others felt that *vanua* and national politics should be separate and that the chiefs should not "dirty their hands" by involving themselves in political wrangling.

I argue, then, that instead of stemming from deep-seated primordial hostilities, Rakiraki attitudes toward the coup were shaped by many contingent factors surrounding the events of the coup and the way they unfolded in the village context. Kaplan and Kelly (2000) and Kelly and Kaplan (2001) suggest that the process of forming consensus and shaping identity always involves a complex series of negotiations among various players all of whom have, themselves, multifaceted approaches to the situation at hand. Thus no single factor, be it economic or political interest or deep-seated cultural values, is a prime mover. Instead, people work out their ideas in the process of negotiating about real issues with real stakes, and the eventual outcome is always unpredictable, since how their various interests and ideas will interact in any particular situation is difficult to forecast.

I will pursue these ideas in my analysis of the Rakiraki reaction to the coup. I will argue that particular local circumstances under which the coup unfolded created an illusion of a solid consensus in Rakiraki behind reserving high government office for indigenous Fijians, even though this did not exist before the coup and might well again evaporate as future events bring other kinds of group oppositions to the fore. I suggest, first, that an illusion of consensus was created by a well-known Fijian preference for avoiding public mention of conflict (Arno 1985, 1993). Before the coup, there had been significant disagreement among villagers about the Chaudhry government and about the Fijian nation more generally, so people had generally avoided discussing national politics. The consequence was an absence of clearly formulated views. However, Speight's actions were so dramatic that it was impossible for villagers to maintain their silence any longer: There was a general need for public discussion in the wake of the crisis to help

people to understand the situation. Furthermore, a rumor that George Speight was "a true son" of Ra Province, of which Rakiraki is a part, made villagers feel enough confidence in others' support for him to venture their opinions in public. This confidence was increased when the local high chief, the Tui Navitilevu, came out publicly in support of the coup. When people began to discuss the issue, the cultural preference for the preservation of public harmony created a tendency for discussions to reach consensus quickly around what seemed to be the safest (that is, most likely to be generally agreed on) view of the coup. This consensus crystallized around local loyalties, since these were the most certain common ground among villagers. Stephen Leavitt's essay (this volume), however, shows how a similar mix of values and beliefs in a neighboring area led to an opposite conclusion: People came out against the coup. This case demonstrates the way identities and beliefs are catalyzed and shaped by particular local configurations of circumstances.

I also argue, however, that the reactions of the villagers to the coup show that indigenous Fijian identity is fluid and could change quickly. Speaking with individual villagers revealed nuanced and complex views of national politics and local identity. People had divided in the 1999 election in unpredictable ways. And communications I received from a couple of villagers after the coup indicated that some people, who had been swept along by the public consensus in support of the coup, had backpedaled in response to economic hardships faced after the coup.

My analysis of Rakiraki attitudes contributes to the literature on ethnicity and nationalism in Fiji by reaffirming the complexity of indigenous Fijian forms of imagining their ethnicity and their nation. Lawson (1996), Norton (1977), Kaplan (1995a, 1995b), and Lal (1992b:104–105) note that the indigenous Fijian community is divided by differences in rank, social class, and region. Kaplan (1995b) and Norton (1977), for example, show how people in the "western" sugar producing region of Viti Levu, stretching from Sigatoka to Rakiraki, have long resented what they see as the dominance of the groups from the southeast of Viti Levu and from Lau in national politics. Lawson also suggests that commoner Fijians have sometimes protested chiefly dominance in politics in general. For instance, Butadroka's Fiji Nationalist Party argued for a return of power to commoners from the hands of chiefs who had sold them out to the British (Rutz 1995). Lawson (1996) and Lal (1992b:105) both argue that national politicians have managed to suppress this dissension from within the Fijian community over the years by raising the specter of Indo-Fijian threats to indigenous Fijian political and land rights. And Lal (1992b:105) and Rutz (1995) argue that the indigenous Fijian community has been increasingly divided over the last decade, as was

shown, for instance, by the way Rabuka's Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) party did not win a majority in the 1992 elections as indigenous Fijians split their vote among many parties. The situation in Rakiraki confirms these views by showing that even the reality of an Indo-Fijian government did not cause indigenous Fijians to forget their differences. Speight's actions may have aggravated tensions between Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians, but they did not unite the indigenous Fijian community.

Examining Rakiraki discourse also shows a shift in conceptions of the Fijian nation. Before the coup, in contrast to many existing analyses of indigenous Fijian views of their nation, many indigenous Fijians in the Rakiraki area were prepared to accept the legitimacy of a government led by an Indo-Fijian. The coup had the unfortunate effect of hardening the opposed perspective, that nonindigenous Fijians could only be "guests" looked after politically by "host" indigenous Fijians. As Foster notes (1995), "imagining" a nation involves more than developing a sense of shared history and peoplehood; it also involves developing a master narrative that shows who the various players are in the nation and how they are related to the larger whole. Rutz suggests that, for many indigenous Fijians, the nation is a sacred entity based on the God-given relationship between ranked Fijian clans and the land (1995). Non-Fijians can only be "guests" of the true owners of the land (see also Norton 2000; Ravuvu 1992). Lawson argues that, at least before 1987, this view was so strong among indigenous Fijians that they could not accept the legitimacy of a nonindigenous Fijian government, even if it was democratically elected (1991). Norton's more recent research on the constitutional review commission in the early 1990s shows the strong carryover of these attitudes (2000). Norton found that most indigenous Fijian groups who made submissions to the forum felt that the Fijian nation should be based on the premise that political power remain largely in the hands of the "host" indigenous Fijians, who could then be trusted, in accordance with their cultural emphasis on generosity and hospitality, to look after the interests of their Indo-Fijian "guests." Only one group with indigenous Fijian members, the Citizens' Coalition, called for race-blind representation with special protections for indigenous Fijian rights.

Examining Rakiraki discourse, however, suggested that some villagers viewed the nation as an extension of the sacred Fijian *vanua*, while others held a view much more similar to that of the Citizens' Coalition. In fact, before the coup, Rakiraki villagers had conceptualized themselves and their nation in many different ways. However, the coup and the events that followed it catalyzed villagers who had previously had no clear opinion or consensus on ethnicity, self, and nation to a much more shared and well-defined view centered on racial and regional identity.

After the Election: Rakiraki Perceptions of Cultural Identity and Nation in Fall 1999

When we first heard of Chaudhry's election as Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister in May 1999, my anthropologist husband, Stephen Leavitt, and I wondered whether this election would lead to a coup and jeopardize our carefully laid out plans to spend the next year in Fiji on sabbatical. Our arrival in Nadi, and later in the village of Rakiraki, where we had lived two years before, seemed just to confirm that things were business as usual in Fiji. Following our usual practice, we started attending any sort of public gathering on offer: church services, community meetings, district political meetings, and so on. In none of the meetings was the new government even mentioned unless in such a veiled fashion as to elude us and our local informants altogether. We had less access to the gossip that went on around kava circles before and after meetings since, particularly in the beginning, our linguistic skills were not up to helping us to follow the local dialect. But the reports that we got about this gossip never involved the Chaudhry government. People were more interested in local status battles and in the general issue of long-term land leases of Fijian land to Indo-Fijian farmers that were about to expire.

In retrospect, I suspect people were avoiding public mention of the election because of deep differences in opinion. The Methodist district pastor was a Lauan who came from the same village as Ratu Mara, the Fijian president who had urged ethnic Fijians to accept the Chaudhry government. This alone would have been sufficient to suppress any criticism of the Chaudhry government in church and in events attended by the district pastor. A more significant problem, however, was that the regional high chief, the Tui Navitilevu, had run for office as a representative of Rabuka's SVT party and had been defeated. The SVT had made the radical move of forming an alliance with the dominant Indo-Fijian party, the National Federation Party, for the election. This alienated both Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian voters, many of whom had defected from these two most popular parties but had split along ethnic lines, Indo-Fijians to vote for Chaudhry's Labour Party and indigenous Fijians to vote for a number of Fijian parties. The Tui, then, had taken a moderate position in joining the SVT in their alliance with the main Indo-Fijian party. That his villagers did not support his views was shown by his resounding defeat in the election. The silence on the Chaudhry government that we witnessed in our first several months in Fiji, then, was likely the result of major disagreements about the issue of concessions to Indo-Fijians between many villagers and two of the respected leaders of the village, the Tui and the district pastor.

Differences in opinion regarding the issue of Indo-Fijians in the Fijian

nation also seemed to extend down the status ranks in the village. One issue dividing villagers was whether there was anything intrinsically wrong with having an Indo-Fijian prime minister. One of my closest informants, an older woman who was well read and politically active, said that she felt that Fijians should not be forced to accept a "foreigner" as their prime minister. Another informant, however, a young woman who had married into Rakiraki, said that she herself had voted for Chaudhry as had many of the younger people she knew. She said that it didn't make any difference whether the prime minister was indigenous Fijian or Indo-Fijian; what mattered was the way whoever it was ran the country. This view was shared by all the Indo-Fijians we spoke with. My second informant said that under Rabuka and the SVT Fiji had just stagnated. Chaudhry had promised economic change, and from her perspective, as the wife of an army officer, he had delivered, since one of his first acts had been to raise the salaries of the army.

Stephanie Sienkiewicz, a Union College undergraduate who was one of seven students who accompanied us to Fiji in fall of 1999, also asked people about their responses to the election that had brought Chaudhry to power. Sienkiewicz found that many of the indigenous Fijians she spoke with were not opposed to the idea of an Indo-Fijian prime minister:

One Fijian woman's comments about the prime minister indicate this since she makes no reference to his ethnicity at all. "We'll see how he works out. Rabuka was with us for five years. We'll see how this one keeps his promises." Similarly, a Fijian man told me that Chaudhry was elected because he is able to do the job.

Another Fijian man told me that most Fijians want a Fijian prime minister but that Fijians must have voted for Chaudhry for him to be elected. He stated simply, "More people voted for this party and this party won. So an Indian is the prime minister." He told me that most of the Fijian leaders were corrupt and he thought that people were influenced by campaigning to choose the Labour Party that is now in power. People thought that it was good for this prime minister to be in government because he said he was going to solve the land-lease problem. This informant's ideas about the election show that he didn't think of the Fijian and Indian community as two autonomous groups but as one mixed society: "They might have been influenced by campaigning, what they tell people they are going to do. So many promises are going to come. So people might have heard that and they changed their views. Never mind that it's an Indian prime minister. We just want to get a better life."²

When I asked him if he thought that the prime minister of Fiji

should be Fijian he responded, "Oh, it doesn't matter, as long as he looks after the people, to serve the people, Indian or Fijian or part Indian or part Fijian. A Fijian was there from the time of independence until last year. There was not much change in Fiji during that time. The leaders have gotten power only for themselves. That is what most of us think. Even some of the scholarships, most of the scholarships have been given to their children. And the poor people have to struggle for the education of their children. Anybody can be the prime minister if he serves the people." -

Some of the Fijians I interviewed told me that many Fijians pretend to want only a Fijian prime minister but have actually voted for the Indian candidate. "That is what most people now say, that they don't want an Indian prime minister. That is their choice, and now they want to change again"; the same people who say there should be a Fijian prime minister are the ones who in fact voted for Chaudhry. But, "the people have had their say so that's it. That's how it is, democratic." (Sienkiewicz 1999:171-172)

These views, then, reflected a deep difference of opinion about the nature of the Fijian nation: Some believed that the Fijian nation should be built of the same building blocks as the traditional Fijian polity in the village, the *vanua*, with hereditary chiefs playing a large role and Indo-Fijians as guests staying out of communal decisions. Others felt that the nation should be separate from the traditional rural polity and that perhaps the prime minister should just be whoever could prove himself able to do the job best. These views also dispute Lawson's contention that indigenous Fijians do not accept the idea of legitimate change in power within a democratic government (1991). Lawson argued that before the 1987 coup, indigenous Fijians only seemed to accept the legitimacy of democratically elected governments because they were never put to the test by the victory of an Indo-Fijian party. Comments by Rakiraki people interviewed by Stephanie Sienkiewicz and myself, however, reveal that some people were prepared, a couple of months after Chaudhry's election, to accept the legitimacy of the democratic process.

Also implicit here was a resentment of the long years that eastern Fijians, Ratu Mara and Rabuka, had held power during which, in the Rakiraki view, too little help had come their way. Thus, one of Sienkiewicz's informants complained about the way scholarships only went to the rich while poor people struggled. During our 1997 stay in Rakiraki, when Rabuka was still prime minister, some Rakiraki people had complained to me that all the local government positions went to eastern Fijians. An informant who was

strongly opposed to having an Indo-Fijian prime minister told me in 1997 that she had voted for Bavadra, an indigenous Fijian from the west who led the same Labour Party that was later led by Chaudhry. She said that she did this because she thought all resources were funneled to eastern Fijians under Ratu Mara's government. Significant regional resentments, then, contributed to Rakiraki villagers' ambivalence about the Chaudhry government: Many people did not like having an Indo-Fijian prime minister but had not been happy with the prospect of returning Rabuka to office either.

A division in local opinion was also evident in attitudes toward another issue, that is, the place of chiefs, and particularly the local high chief, the Tui Navitilevu, in national politics. One of my closest informants suggested that the Tui's defeat had been a great tragedy that signaled the imminent disintegration of traditional Fijian society. The Tui's defeat, she argued, showed that local indigenous Fijians no longer respected the sacred and time-honored idea of the Fijian *vanua* with hereditary chiefs at the head. Everyone was now just out for himself or herself; such an attitude would erode Fijian communal solidarity and pave the way for Indo-Fijians to take over the country. Others, however, including a man who Stephen Leavitt describes in this volume, suggested that they respected the Tui but just felt that traditional chiefs should not dirty their hands by dabbling in secular politics. This indicates, as Rutz suggests (1995), significant differences in ways of imagining the Fijian nation among indigenous Fijians.

Just this small taste of the debate about politics gives a sense of how complex the issues were and how people could easily end up on either side of the issue depending on what they focused on first. My informant who felt that chiefs should be integral to the government, for instance, had not voted for the Tui, because he represented the SVT, whose coalition with the National Federation Party she opposed; she also disliked Rabuka because he was an eastern Fijian. Conversely, a local Indo-Fijian storekeeper told me that he had voted for the Tui Navitilevu, even though he did not think Fijian chiefs should have a privileged position in national politics, because he favored the idea of Fijians and Indo-Fijians working together. The ambiguities surrounding the election made it difficult to predict how anyone felt about it and, I suspect, kept villagers relatively silent on the topic.

While the villagers remained silent on the Chaudhry government, there was a great deal of discussion of another issue, the imminent expiration of long-term leases of ethnic Fijian land to Indo-Fijian cane farmers. I suggest that people were willing to discuss this issue because there was consensus on it. This is significant, because it was Chaudhry's moves toward reforming the land-lease system that allowed villagers to feel that there was enough consensus against him to make it safe to publicly criticize the idea of having

an Indo-Fijian prime minister. Many of the ethnic Fijians were claiming that they were not going to renew land leases; in fact, several villages had had meetings in which it had been agreed that leases would not be renewed. One of the most successful indigenous Fijian cane farmers in Rakiraki explained to Stephanie Sienkiewicz why he did not want to renew his land leases. His words are significant in that they reveal both the centrality of land to his identity and the potential for the land issue to create discord within the indigenous Fijian population. This man told Sienkiewicz that he wanted to take back his land not only because he could make a lot of money from it, but because it would allow him to reunite his family and lineage, the members of which currently had to live in different areas to get jobs. The farmer told her:

We want our land back because it was leased out to Indians seventy or ninety years ago. I wasn't born by that time; I'm only fifty-six now. That land was leased out by my great-grandfather to Indian people. Some of us don't have any land at all. We just have a small piece to plant our cassava, *dalo* [taro root], and yams. That's for daily living. And a source of income, to plant sugarcane and other crops to sell in the market, we haven't got any leftover land. Because all of our land has been leased out to Indians for a very long time. . . . We gave them the right to lease. If we have enough, we should give them land so they can make a living. [But] right now, the Indians have more of the better land. . . . If we lease the land back to them, it will take another ninety years. . . . [And] Fijians don't want to [make shorter leases either]. In our *koro* [village] meeting we decided that. We just want the land back. . . . We haven't got enough land. Because most of our land was taken by [Indians]. Even my house is half chained to Crown land. At the back of the house is the Crown land. It is owned by the government. But that's our *mataqali* [lineage] land. We know that's our land. Because this land, only one of my sons can have. But the rest are on their own. That's why I told them to get a good education. Three of them can share to buy a tractor to work on the land. . . . You can't buy a truck if you lease out the land. . . . We can mortgage it through the bank so that we can buy what we want to use for the land, tractor [and so on]. . . . We'll have to share. In our *mataqali*, we've got four brothers. We'll give to every house contract numbers so we can work together, work out that land, so we can get our source of income out of that land. (Sienkiewicz 1999:120–122)

Taking back land was linked in this man's mind with the possibility of once again becoming a strong, autonomous, local group, beholden to no one. Under the existing arrangement, this man's lineage was split up by the need to find jobs. But if they could take back their leased land, they could, once again, become a strong, autonomous group. Landownership, then, fostered a strong local identity.

The farmer went on to explain that he wanted back not only the land leased out to Indo-Fijians, but also land that had been claimed by the Crown when the land was registered in the early twentieth century. His feelings of being abused by the government were apparent and suggest that the land issue had led to tensions within the indigenous Fijian community. The farmer told Sienkiewicz: "We haven't got enough land to share. Us is enough. We haven't got enough land. We begged the government. We still have more land on the government side. A European came and bought it for two shillings from our great-grandfathers. It belongs to the government now. We are reapplying again. We have lots of [people in our] *mataqali* and not enough land" (1999:121). This man, then, resented an indigenous Fijian government that, in his view, had failed to return to his group what was rightfully theirs.

I suggest that the land issue was tapping into a strong local identity and a strong sense of having been abused at the hands of southeastern and Lauan chiefs acting in alliance with the British. Kaplan (1995b) notes a longstanding resentment among people in the Rakiraki area of Bauan chiefs brought in by the British to act as *roko tui* (administrative officials) under the British colonial administration. The British could not find strong regional chiefs in the Ra area, where *vanua* tended to be smaller and ranking within *yavusa* (clans) was not as pronounced as in southeastern Fiji (Norton 1977). And so they imported Bauan officials in an attempt to make western Fijian culture conform to the Bauan model (Kaplan 1995b). The British, in alliance with southeastern Fijians, also set up three administrative confederacies in Fiji, each under the head of a paramount chief or *roko tui*. Western Fiji was divided between two confederacies, both of which were headed by *roko tui* in southeastern Fiji.

The Rakiraki people's continued resentment of these arrangements was evident in several ways during our stay. In early 2000, all of the western chiefs met in an effort to formulate a plan to construct a western confederacy (Lal 1992b mentions earlier efforts along these lines). Even though these plans came to nothing, people continued to express resentment at the notion of being subordinated to southeastern confederacies. One woman insisted to me that the west had never been conquered by the southeast. The three confederacies were just an administrative fiction. Tensions were also appar-

ent in a wedding, just a few weeks before the coup, that many Rakiraki villagers attended in Suva. The bride was the daughter of the Tui Navitilevu's sister and the groom was a close relative of Adi Lala Mara. Adi Lala, the wife of Ratu Mara, is the Roko Tui Dreketi, *roko* of one of the three confederacies, Burebasaga. The Rakiraki women who attended the wedding had told me beforehand that this would be a glorious event, since it brought together two such prestigious families, the family of the Tui Navitilevu and the family of the Roko Tui Dreketi. In the minds of the local people, this was a marriage between equals. At the wedding, however, the Rakiraki women were very irritated by signs that the groom's side saw themselves as being of higher rank than the bride's side. Instead of sitting together as was usual at a wedding, the Rakiraki women complained, they had had to eat separately from the women of the groom's side and had had to wait until the women from that side had eaten first.

The *sevusevu* (ceremonial presentation of kava) presented by the Rakiraki people at the wedding also asserted the Rakiraki view that the two parties were of equal status. The *sevusevu* also subtly raised the possibility that the family of the groom might view the Rakiraki people as uneducated "country bumpkins." The Tui Navitilevu's herald, Eroni, opened by asserting that he would speak in his local dialect, because he did not know Bauan, the national standard Fijian taught in schools and the language of the Rewa area from which the Roko Tui Dreketi hailed. In fact, I had heard Eroni perform prayers in fluent Bauan on many occasions. His insistence on speaking in Rakiraki dialect, then, was a subtle assertion of an autonomous local identity: Rakiraki people would speak in their own dialect, not adopt the Bauan dialect in deference to a higher-ranking group. Eroni also presented the *sevusevu* as going from the Tui Navitilevu to the Roko Tui Dreketi, thus moving the two to equivalent status. A *sevusevu* is generally presented from the highest chief of one group to the highest chief of the other group, whether or not these people are present at the occasion. A possible alternative here would have been to say that the *sevusevu* was coming from the Roko Tui of Kubuna, the confederacy of which Rakiraki was a part. This construal would have acknowledged the Tui Navitilevu to be an underling of the Kubuna confederacy and, thus, a lower-order chief than the Roko Tui Dreketi. This *sevusevu*, then, played with the tendency of the urban south-easterners to view the rural people from the north and west as inferior and reframed this relationship as one between equals under Fijian tradition and under God. In fact, *sevusevu* in western Fiji are always delivered in local dialect rather than in Bauan Fijian. In this way, they assert (and reflect) strong local identities and a rejection of the view of Fiji as a united chiefdom led from the southeast and Lau.

Winter 2000: The Buildup to the Coup

The first signs of local discontent with the Chaudhry government began to emerge in January 2000, though these signs were so subtle that I failed to pick them up at the time and was surprised to see them in transcriptions of meetings after I returned from Fiji. In the new year, the head pastor in the Rakiraki Methodist Church began routinely to mention in his opening prayers in church that indigenous Fijians were facing very hard times. I was puzzled by these words and asked my research assistant about it, but she only guessed that he must mean that Jesus might soon appear, since this was the dawning of the new millennium. I suspect now that the pastor was referring to current political events that were generating discontent with the Chaudhry government. The Chaudhry government started to call for a reconsideration of land laws in Fiji, arguing that the Fijian economy was sure to collapse if ethnic Fijian landowners displaced Indo-Fijian tenant farmers on a large scale. Rakiraki villagers had been complaining all along about the Chaudhry government's policy of compensating evicted Indo-Fijian tenants with \$26,000 payments to help them start a new life; villagers argued that the indigenous Fijians who were reclaiming their land should receive a similar payment to help them start out as farmers. After Christmas, Chaudhry arranged for groups of Fijian chiefs to tour countries like Malaysia, where land reform had paved the way for prosperity, and began putting forward plans for Fijian clans to surrender their "unused land" to the government, which would find ways to use this land to increase the general prosperity of the country. I first heard about these plans in gossip after a meeting where a couple of senior men joked that the chiefs must have enjoyed the rugby game they saw in Malaysia but certainly would not have been interested in anything else. The Chaudhry government also suggested that the Native Land Trust Board, which oversaw the distribution of lease money for Fijians' lands, was corrupt and should be reformed. All of these moves generated anxiety in Rakiraki people that began to show up—albeit hardly in an overwhelming flood—in public speeches and in the gossip after meetings.

In early January 2000, one of the two villages composing Rakiraki, Navutulevu, invited a pastor who had been thrown out of the Methodist Church—the church that dominates Fijian villages—to speak at a new holiday, "Navutulevu Day," invented just for the new millennium. My notes about the occasion indicate that people believed this event had been planned as a slap in the face of the district Methodist pastor because of the sacking of a popular local lay preacher. This sacking was by far the most popular topic of conversation during this period. Rereading the transcripts of the service

and reviewing the events that followed suggest that there was a deeper meaning to the event. The guest speaker stated that Fijians, like Abraham, had been called by God to leave the old village and start a new way of life in the new millennium. Fijians, he said, should return to the land and work communally as the kibbutzniks had done in Israel to grow new crops and make the country prosper. The result was that a few weeks later a party of young Navutulevu men went up to a neighboring area to plant a kava plantation—an event that was spoken of positively in both villages as promising a new road to Fijian prosperity.

The connection between this event and Chaudhry's talk of Fijians turning over unused land was not evident to me until I reviewed the transcripts of the service and noticed that the leader of Navutulevu had introduced the guest speaker with the following words:

The father of Amaleia, from Jerusalem, worked well and had good health in the house of the King of Susani, and then he said, "We go now, we build a fence in Jerusalem that the enemy will not be able to attack us." It is like that in Navutulevu. We should build the fence in Navutulevu so the enemy cannot attack.³

The headman's words were so veiled that they meant nothing to my research assistant. In retrospect, however, it seems most likely that the fence he was building by sending a party of young men to use "unused" land was a fence against the Chaudhry government. This interpretation was supported by the remarks of one of the pastors in the Methodist Church, a few weeks later, when he blessed the annual offering of first fruits of the new year in church by saying that Fijians should not be afraid of the soil; they had been put on earth to grow crops for the Lord. He continued:

One thing that we are worried about much at this time today, our land, is the root of fighting in the government. They want to take the land, that which is not being planted. That is the main reason why the government wants to take the land. Because it should be planted. It doesn't matter if it's your land, the government will plant it for you. That means the land should be just planted. It is right the things said here should cause pain to us, the owners. Yes, but one thing you should do, you should work your land. I don't want, myself, the giving of lease [money], because it's right that we should just plant our land. . . . [It is] our duty to plant it, put it in the soil, everything, because it will look nice to the Lord to see here and see his farmers are healthy.

These two speeches reveal that indigenous Fijians in Rakiraki were beginning to feel anxious that their land would be taken away just when they felt themselves to be at the point of reclaiming this land. The speeches also reveal a wider anxiety about the place of Fijians in the nation: The Lord gave indigenous Fijians a special place in the nation as guardians of the land, but Fijians had turned away from the Lord by not working their own land; they were ashamed to be farmers. Fijians had to build a fence against the enemy by returning to the land and, in doing so, building up the nation of Fiji. These comments implicitly spoke to the popular Indo-Fijian view endorsed by the government that Indo-Fijians had built up the nation of Fiji through their hard work as cane farmers (see Trnka, this volume). Fijians, the two speakers suggested, must take back the land and build up the nation themselves through fulfilling God's plan for them. The Chaudhry government's challenge on the land, then, cut to the root of ethnic Fijian identity and, at least in Rakiraki, catalyzed a strong sense that indigenous Fijians must build their own nation, without interference from Indo-Fijians. The potential for this issue to create divisions within the indigenous Fijian community was also evident here. The pastor was criticizing the many indigenous Fijians who had, in his view, left their sacred role in the nation and the *vanua* by spurning farming in favor of urban wage labor. At stake here, then, was a wider issue of how individual Fijians should be linked to *vanua* and nation.

While there were rumblings about the Chaudhry government's plans for land reform, these did not by any means produce a popular movement to displace the government. In fact, in late April, just a few weeks before the coup, there was a large public march in Lautoka, a town about two hours' drive from Rakiraki, to protest land reform. The Tui Navitilevu personally attended the march along with two close friends, but no one else in the Rakiraki area went. One man commented to me afterwards that he thought it was wrong for the Tui to get mixed up in that kind of thing.

Significantly, however, popular support in Rakiraki for the protest over land was increased when the Tui Navitilevu was asked to head the Taukei Movement in a Lautoka meeting. After that, several Rakiraki men announced their intention of going to the next march in Suva, a march that coincided with Speight's takeover of Parliament. I suggest again that popular support was mobilized when this became an issue involving regional relations rather than ethnic relations. Villagers were mobilized by the prospect of becoming a strong, autonomous, local polity. They were rallying around their Tui where they had previously failed to rally as indigenous Fijians united against an Indo-Fijian threat.

The significance of regional tensions in the movement were, for instance,

apparent in the words of Apisai Tora, the head of the Taukei Movement who hailed from the west, just outside Nadi, before the Lautoka march. Tora started by protesting the disrespectful attitude that Chaudhry had shown toward the whole indigenous Fijian community in his land reform efforts. He showed the assembled protesters a letter that he intended to present to Ratu Mara after the Suva march:

This is a letter to the gentleman president of the government, the honorable gentleman the Tui Nayau [Ratu Mara]. This is a letter from the party of the *taukei* [i.e., owners of the land or indigenous Fijians] and the supporters of the Taukei Movement to be given to the commissioner, when we arrive there, who should then go to give it to the gentleman president. It is written in English. Yes, here is the translation into Fijian. [Reads letter.] We hope that you have a long life and are blessed, President, in your high position. It is shown here, the Taukei Movement's unhappiness and anxiety about the things that have been done by the government of Mahendra Chaudhry, that started from the time when the election of 1999 was won. We want to show our unhappiness at the disrespectful way he is treating us, the descendants of the owners, by trying to take away our land. Then there are the things I have already explained, about ALTA, we are also unhappy about these. And also the Land Use Commission, they are giving away money to the evicted tenants and not thinking of the owners who are starting farms on the land. And also the Mahogany. All these things said and done by the government. The Taukei Movement hasn't done anything. . . . Just him [Chaudhry] he has done everything, had tyrannical ways. Presumptuous, conceited has been his leadership.⁴

But then, after inviting the Tui Navitilevu to head the protest movement, Tora pointed to the particular importance of the west in the nation of Fiji, implicitly suggesting that the interests of the west might not be properly safeguarded by a leader from another area of the country: "The duty that called us together this day today is one that confirms the blood and the membership in the *vanua*. They come sit today the chiefs from the west in our *vanua*, the *vanua* that enriches the government of Fiji and enables the money to come, and also the airport, gold mine, sugar mills, many big hotels, yes when they want to grab our soil. [They have] come together the high chiefs . . . come sit this day today to do their duty. We thank them very much." Tora's words clearly played on racial hostilities, chastising Chaudhry for ignoring the sacred customs of indigenous Fijians and for threatening

their key place as the owners and hosts in Fiji. Tora located the ultimate power in Fiji in the hands of an indigenous Fijian, Ratu Mara, on whom the movement would call to tell Chaudhry that he had gone too far and must respect the sacred status of the indigenous Fijian community within the nation. Implicit here, though, was the idea that having an Indo-Fijian prime minister was not, in itself, unacceptable; the problem was that Chaudhry had failed to show respect for Fijian culture. But Tora also appealed to strong regional identities by pointing out that the west was the source of much of Fiji's wealth. Since Chaudhry, himself, was from the west, Tora must have been implicitly addressing these words to Ratu Mara, a Lauan who might need to be reminded of the central role of the west in the Fijian nation.

The Week Following the Coup

My first inkling that Rakiraki village was going to go strongly in favor of Speight came when I went to visit a neighbor a few hours after the coup occurred to find out if the rumors of the coup were true. I found my neighbor sitting with a bunch of friends around a kava bowl and the radio. The assembled men were happy to explain the reports to me and to tell me that George Speight, the leader of the coup, was from Ra. Speight, one man told me, was a true Fijian, being both from Ra and in the military. He had done what needed to be done: He had stood up to the Indo-Fijians who were trying to overextend their power and had shown them the strength of indigenous Fijians. These were words I heard repeated many times in the following days. Even a young woman who had voted for Chaudhry, after initially opposing the coup under instructions from her husband, was within a couple of days saying that anyone who opposed Speight was just a big *quari*, or homosexual. A local schoolteacher cheerfully told me that she had been willing to give the idea of having an Indo-Fijian prime minister a chance but that Chaudhry had clearly shown that it was a bad idea by moving forward on land reforms. Now they would have a new constitution mandating an indigenous Fijian prime minister. It was good that the coup had shown them a new generation of indigenous Fijian leaders like Speight, since the old leaders like Ratu Mara were clearly past it. Another neighbor suggested that Ratu Mara, who had come out publicly against the coup, was not a true Fijian at all: He had straight hair and seemed to prefer to speak English; he must be mixed race and probably mostly European. Speight, in contrast, was a true Fijian and a son of Ra. Indeed, Ratu Mara had elected to address the nation on Fiji One, the national television station, in English. He was probably trying to speak, as president, to all Fijians, indigenous and Indo-

Fijian alike, sending a message that Fiji was a multiracial nation. But this use of English struck a sour note with my neighbor, convincing her that Ratu Mara was not a true Fijian. After a news report on a march in Ba where indigenous Fijians had joined Indo-Fijians in condemning the coup, some senior men gossiping after a meeting wondered how anyone opposed to the coup could call himself or herself a Fijian.

These comments revealed a hardening of antagonistic attitudes toward Indo-Fijians. Just a week before the coup, my husband and I had encountered several of our indigenous Fijian neighbors at a local Indo-Fijian wedding. Several of them had told us how they had many Indo-Fijian friends whom they had grown up with as playmates. But on the night that Speight and his men took the Fijian Parliament hostage, an Indo-Fijian elementary school on the outside of Rakiraki burned to the ground. A young neighbor told me that she had been awoken by the fire in the middle of the night and had gone with some other villagers to watch the school burn. On the way they had passed the house of an Indo-Fijian and had jokingly called out that they would burn his house down if he didn't tie up his dog. On the way back, the young woman continued, they noticed that the dog had been tied and had been amazed that the Indo-Fijian man had taken them seriously. The woman was amused but seemed at the same time slightly ashamed. Some villagers later suggested that the Indo-Fijians must have burned the school down themselves. A few days later, three Indo-Fijian-owned stores were looted and burned in Vaileka, a nearby town, while many of our indigenous Fijian neighbors watched.

Even at the height of the coup, however, expressions of antagonism toward Indo-Fijians were mitigated by more conciliatory messages. When the young men burned the three stores in Vaileka, one neighbor told me, they had invited the assembled viewers to go in and loot the stores, but, she said, many people had been too ashamed to do this. A village meeting was held a few days later in which a senior man delivered a message from the Tui Navitilevu, who was in Suva, asking that the looting in Rakiraki stop and expressing shame at a report that the young men who had done the looting had said that the Tui had asked them to do it. The senior man said:

The DO [district officer], the *roko*, and one police came to my house around noon. As you have just heard before, there has been looting in our *vanua* here, Rakiraki. The DO talked about a phone call from Lei Uluda [the Tui Navitilevu], who rang from Suva. He called and asked that there be no more looting in our *vanua*. Let it be enough. This message is especially for families with children who loot. Also, he said that he is very, very sad when he heard that

his name was drawn in. [The looters] said the Tui Navitilevu said that they should loot. He was very sad that his name was drawn in. They said that he said that the damage should be done. He was very sad and ashamed when he heard that report of the looting in Vaileka being associated with him. Yes it was really something. It really pains me, and I feel shame at this report. Because of that I then called you together today that we could discuss this important message. . . . Yes I speak especially to you the boys who are suddenly caught up in this kind of thing. Let it be clear to you of this *vanua* here of Rakiraki that there is one leader, the honorable gentleman the Tui Navitilevu. You should think of each of the women who brought you up to serve the *vanua* well, and also you should think of the church of the *vanua* of Rakiraki and of its leader of the big division of Ra. What will the rest of the villagers say about the *vanua* when things like this happen here.

Here the senior man relayed a message from the Tui expressing shame at the looting and asking the Rakiraki people to help round up the looters. Indeed, local indigenous Fijians turned out in large numbers to help the police round up the young men responsible. When a young man was taken by the police the next day, I heard no complaints from the family, even though they said that they did not think that he could possibly have been involved, since they had known where he was at the time of the looting.

Also striking here, however, were the terms in which the Tui and his spokesman in the village condemned the looting. The Tui had little to say about the importance of respecting Indo-Fijians. He was more disturbed by the idea that he had been made to look bad when the young men said he had told them to do the looting. The spokesman stressed that everyone must respect the Tui as his or her leader and take care to project an image of being a united, orderly *vanua* to the rest of the world. What seemed to be at issue here, then, was that Rakiraki people should support their local leader, who was now vying for power on a national stage, and project the image of being a strong, united polity behind him. The appeal here, then, was to foster local pride, implicitly vis-à-vis the other indigenous Fijians with whom the Tui was vying for power.

Consistent with this emphasis on local pride was the way Rakiraki villagers' comments indexed the emergence of a kind of indigenous Fijian identity centered on a display of local strength and autonomy. Speight, unlike Ratu Mara, was a true Fijian, because he was strong and because he was a warrior. Several women commented to me admiringly on how muscular and fit Speight looked when he appeared on an evening news broadcast. Further-

more, this display of warrior strength was closely linked in people's minds to Ra Province, of which Rakiraki was a part. Ratu Mara, from Lau and perhaps even mostly European, was not a true Fijian because he refused to stand up and display strength. Besides, he was an old man and not from the military, according to a few villagers. Ra people, then, were not educated professionals like easterners; but they were the strength of the nation.

These analyses were particularly interesting in that they required a very selective way of looking at Speight. Speight, as the Fiji One broadcasts made known, was half-European and had been educated in the United States. He was a businessman, not a military man. His ties with Ra, on his Fijian mother's side, were somewhat unclear. One woman claimed that he had grown up in her home village nearby but quickly backtracked when I asked her if she had ever met him. Furthermore, Speight spoke only English, and that with an Australian accent, in Fiji One broadcasts. Thus, he was, objectively, no more obviously Fijian than Ratu Mara. The Rakiraki people's strong desire to regain local autonomy and the image of being a strong region, protecting Fijian rights in a way that southeastern and Lauan chiefs had failed to do for all their erudition and wealth, was evident in the way that they embraced Speight as a military man and true son of Ra despite evidence to the contrary.

I suggest, in concluding, that the coup and the preceding moves toward land reform by the Chaudhry government had created consensus where none had existed before. Villagers had been divided on the issue of what the Fijian nation should look like and what role chiefs should play in it. However, everyone had fears of crafty Indo-Fijians tricking ethnic Fijians out of their land, and Chaudhry had played into those fears. Furthermore, in coming out against the coup, Ratu Mara tapped into local anxieties about domination by southeastern Fijians and pushed Ra people toward supporting the coup. These two common factors—plus the Tui Navitilevu's coming out in support of the coup—gave the villagers enough common ground that they could safely talk about the coup. And, in the process, they came to an increased sense of solidarity that swept along in support of the coup even people who had voted for Chaudhry and a young neighbor who had previously preferred the company of Indo-Fijians. What emerged was a strong desire for local autonomy and a desire to see their region as the true guardians of Fiji.

I also suggest, however, that the burst of regional pride catalyzed by the coup was a product of local circumstances and could just as easily evaporate as those circumstances change. People had come together to talk about the coup because it was such a dramatic and potentially fearful event that cried out for interpretation. In coming together they had, in accordance with

Fijian values, tried to generate consensus among themselves. But as the crisis faded in following months, so perhaps did this strong consensus. I received a letter from a young woman written on July 8, a few days before the hostages were finally released. She wrote: "Even for us Fijian or real Fijian we are living with fear nowadays. If we go in town, we are not walking like before, we are walking fast and rushing to whichever place we are going to. Oh Karen and Steve, we miss our beloved Fiji as it is known before, beautiful Fiji, no more." She said that she now wished that the coup had never occurred, and she regretted that her Indo-Fijian landlord now lived in fear of his indigenous Fijian neighbors.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork from August 1999 to June 2000 was supported by a Union College grant. Previous fieldwork in Fiji in 1997 was supported by a National Science Foundation grant.
2. This and other interviews were conducted in English and tape-recorded.
3. This and other public speeches were tape-recorded and translated from the local dialect of the speaker to English by me with the aid of a local research assistant.
4. This speech was tape-recorded and translated from Nadi dialect by me with the aid of a Fijian research assistant.

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