

Chapter 3

The erosion of hereditary privilege

When a newcomer such as Sir Everard im Thurn observed Fijian society from the outside, it was easy to conclude, as he did, that Fijian chiefs were bleeding their people pale. For the person of the chief was still hedged with elaborate ceremonial, deferential modes of indirect and plural address, courtly euphemisms, crouching low when he passed, the tabu attached to his clothing and food, and above all the dread fear of incurring his ancestors' curse by even unwitting breaches of his sacredness. (Even half a century later when customary modes of respect were said to be breaking down, there was no more common story in folklore and personal reminiscence than the evils that befell a man who went against his chief.)

It was a mistake, though, to perceive Fijian chieftainship in the twentieth century simply as a system of despotism. So much of the chief's style, dignity, income and power depended on the practical goodwill of a people no longer dependent on him for their land or physical security. They gave food, property and labour to the chief with the clear understanding that he represented the honour of their group in its dealings with other groups and that he would bear the main burden of hospitality to visitors. He was helped, then, to maintain a certain 'state' but expected to exercise liberality to all. Fijian expectations of the chiefly order were well expressed by Epeli Rokowaqa in the Wesleyan newspaper Ai Tukutuku Vakalotu in 1932:

The Ratu or Tui or Rokotui: it is his heavy burden to rule the land . . . the installing groups entrust the land to him because they rely on him to be their source of life, prosperity and increase.¹

The people expected chiefs in government positions to use the perquisites of office to maintain a greater state and incur greater liabilities. There is little evidence to suggest that Fijian chiefs amassed fortunes in office, but much to show that they lived beyond their means to meet the reciprocal obligations attached to their privileges.

Im Thurn saw it otherwise. He was concerned about the extent to which the Native Regulations protected the lala rights of chiefs to make levies on the people for their personal needs: housebuilding, garden planting, supplying visitors with food, cutting and building canoes, supplying turtle, and making mats, masi cloth and other articles.

Without lala, the Council of Chiefs had declared in 1892, their social organization would be destroyed.² In one form or another lala entered into all relationships between the people and their chiefs. In 1875 David Wilkinson echoed chiefly experience when he wrote: 'in fact it is the keystone of the Chief's government and authority over his people, the channel through which comes his "sinews of war" in times of trouble; and his "ways and means" in times of peace'.³ In 1898 he reaffirmed that there was nothing so 'natural familiar or so effective to keep up the peoples industry', but he regretted that lala had been brought into disrepute by 'young bumptious, covetious, impecunious, indolent chiefs who impose upon the people simply because they are of the family who have the . . . fudule right over many tribes or peoples'.⁴

Im Thurn based his assessment of lala primarily on detailed reports from Kadavu, where the chiefs either retained more power over their people than in any other province, or had to exercise it more openly because their people were so turbulent. 'Of course the custom of lala is objectionable in our eyes', confided Francis Baxendale of the Native Department to im Thurn, marking well his reader's prejudices, 'especially as the chiefs have for some time, in many places, given up doing their part of custom, but vested rights cannot be disposed of off hand'.⁵ He was commenting on a complaint of a Kadavu man: 'The chiefs' lala is our trouble - our taxes a mere bagatelle . . . Never a day passes without some exaction - 10 yams here - 10 there, a root of grog, a fowl, a pig. We work and produce copra - the Chief sells it for money - get nothing: he levies yams which he sells for money.'⁶

On one inspection of Kadavu, it was learned that the Roko Tui had levied 5000 yams on Nabukelevu and sent the Sanima people to cut buabua and vesi trees for his new house. It was not of course registered on the program of work. The Methodist mission in Kadavu - as in every province - asked for contributions in kind, say, twelve yams for each man, woman and child every three months, and arranged a highly successful annual vakamisioneri

collection along the competitive lines of customary exchange, with district vying against district to keep a continuous procession of contributors taking coins to swell the collection plate by which their district's honour would be measured. In 1905 vakamisioneri collections totalled over £5000.

These facts built up in Im Thurn's mind the impression of a people continually being discouraged and impoverished by greedy chiefs and missionaries: 'practically all the rights are to the chiefs and not to the "commoners"'.⁷ After the Governor had assailed the Council of Chiefs in 1905 (see previous chapter), his speech was published in the government newspaper Na Mata and some villagers wrote to thank him for launching a new era: 'We will be free to give our attention to other things for the benefit of our wives and children'.⁸ Im Thurn undoubtedly believed he had a vast silent majority behind him. He was encouraged in June 1905 to make the death of Cakaudrove's high chief, the Tui Cakau, an opportunity to ban 'these burdensome funeral ceremonies' and begin lightening the load on the people - though this particular decision, to ban the burua or mourning ceremonies, was more likely to have shocked the people: it robbed them of one of the great occasions in Fijian life.⁹ And it was only spectacular inter-provincial gatherings such as this that the government had a chance of regulating. A letter to Na Mata in September 1906 described a small exchange (solevu) that had just taken place between some of the ladies of Bau and Vuci village, Tokatoka. The ladies brought only three snakes and traditional clothes, the writer claimed, and exchanged them for sixty mats. They received three days of hospitality during which were consumed a cow, thirty pigs, 800 yams, 910 puddings, countless taro and £2 worth of tea. The ladies then returned to Bau with 133 mats, eighty tins of biscuits, and piles of yams and dalo for their chiefs.¹⁰

If it offended government that these kinds of exchanges continued to absorb so much of the productive energies of the people, it concerned Fijians more when they did not take place with the customary sense of proportion and reciprocity, or when the Bauan chiefs (the main culprits) and others failed in their return obligations. Another writer in Na Mata added a further dimension to the lala question: 'At this time it seems to me that our chiefs are ruining or perverting the custom of lala for they exercise lala on the whole province according to their government appointments.'¹¹ Although this complaint was

answered by others who pointed out how much greater lala exactions were in the old days, the real question in the Fijian mind seems not to have been the actual extent of lala but the ease with which chiefly Rokos and Bulis dispensed with the customary ways of making requests and treated lala as a form of remuneration.

The problem of accommodating traditional lala rights within the colonial order can be best illustrated in Tailevu. From many decades before Cession and until Thurston called a halt in 1894, the Bauan chiefs had exercised wholesale lala rights on those island communities of Lomaiviti known as qalivakabau, subject-to-Bau, and also on certain groups in Tailevu known as the kai vali, household servants of the Bauans. In the rest of Tailevu and Lomaiviti the lala rights of the Bauan chiefs were more circumscribed. Levies were contributed either voluntarily or were requested through properly appointed mata, envoys or intermediaries. According to Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, who grew up in Cakobau's household, mata from the nearby districts of Namata, Namara, Dravo, Buretu, and Kiuva lived permanently on Bau. The mata would on occasion be sent to their towns with some request to be made vakaveiwekani, 'as if from relatives', for all these people were counted as true Bauans (kai Bau dina). Then in the north of the province there were the towns of the kai Waimaro Dri (the districts of Namalata, Sawakasa, Wailotua and Naloto) who were allies or borderers (bati) required to send aid to the Bauans in time of war. Other districts still further north - Namena, Dawasama, and Nakorotubu in Ra - contributed to Bauan trading exchanges (solevu), as did certain parts of Naitasiri province and the original inhabitants of Suva. First fruits, isevu, were not presented to the Vunivalu of Bau but to the temple Navatanitawake. In a good year offerings (roverove) of yams might be made from the bati towns and others, but they were, claimed Ratu Joni, voluntary tokens of friendship.¹²

Given the military might of Bau before Cession, the voluntary nature of tribute from Tailevu should not be overemphasized. Ratu Joni's more important observation was that the bureaucratic operations of the Fijian Administration had effectively levelled away these nice distinctions between the status of each vanua or district and the roles of particular villages. Though traditional ranking continued to be preserved in seating arrangements and the details of etiquette and oratory within the procedures of the councils, no village or district could

claim a special exemption from meeting the needs of the province on the grounds that Bau had first to approach them in the proper way.¹³ It was all too simple a matter for the Roko Tui of Tailevu to decide that every man in the province was to bring, say, ten yams to Bau as the Roko's official lala - it was no longer relevant to inquire what was the Vunivalu's customary entitlement. As a Native Lands Commission inquiry showed in 1917 to an embarrassing degree, the Bauan chiefs were losing touch with the old order and were confused about their exact relationships with particular communities and their rights and privileges at custom.¹⁴

To deal with the Fijian Administration, then, is to deal with an ambiguous amalgam of old and new. The imposition of colonial rule and appointments deriving from the Crown intruded radically new principles of organization with accountability to the top, yet in many ways the chiefs were trying to lead their people as they had always done and felt much the same obligation to ensure their prosperity. Provincial and district councils operated in the customary style and really bore little resemblance to western institutions of local government. On the other hand, the more official duties such as tax collecting and road making deviated from the customary ways of using men and resources (to satisfy the minimum demands of colonial rule), the more need there was for the apparatus of a developed state, especially the system of courts and punishments. Conflicts of loyalty and confusion of rules were thus built into the Fijian Administration. Yet perhaps these same conflicts and ambiguities were its fundamental strength in that they arose from the interlocking of bureaucratic and customary processes, giving to one the advantages of the other. Allegiance to chiefly officials was total: 'there was no situation where a chief was not a chief'.¹⁵

Some of the younger Rokos were sensitive to the government's preoccupation with lala and moved of their own accord to restrict it. Thus Ratu A. Finau, Roko Tui Lau, who had unsuccessfully tried to levy property in 1901 to take to Bau in honour of the deceased Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, announced at the end of 1905 that he had abolished lala except for housebuilding and plantations. He was much praised.¹⁶ In 1909 the new Roko of notorious Kadavu, Ratu Ifereimi Qasevakatini, suggested that all 'official' lala attached to the office of Buli and his own be abolished and that each chief limit the exercise of lala

to his own people and adhere strictly to local custom. The response was unexpected. The Bulis protested that their people were not prepared to let the Roko of their province be entirely dependent on his own people for his lala:

They desired to do their share, in fact they objected to be left out, especially as oco [a feast] was to be provided. They desired to assist the Roko of the Province as had always been the custom in Kadavu. Buli Sanima sd. 'We are Fijians - not Indians, let us act always as Fijians in accordance with the custom of our lands.'¹⁷

Whereupon it was resolved that each man of five districts would give the Roko ten yams and four districts would plant his gardens as desired. The Bulis' lala was set as two days' work in July, August and September. It is a nice glimpse of the tendency of Fijians to come to rapid terms with congenial aspects of the Fijian Administration and hallow them as chiefly customs - indispensable to the Fijian way of life.¹⁸

Nevertheless in 1911 the Council of Chiefs finally resolved to forgo the Roko's official lala.¹⁹ Lala exercised on behalf of other Fijian officials, usually the magistrates, provincial scribes and Native Medical Practitioners (NMPs), was also abolished. The officials were given a small increase in their salaries and told to rely on them. Only the Bulis retained lala rights attached to their government position. (Usually the men of a district worked a day or two each month in the Buli's garden.)

A revised code of Native Regulations issued in 1912 abolished the original regulation (III of 1877) regarding chiefs so that it was no longer an offence for Fijians to disobey their chiefs 'in all things lawful according to their customs'. A new and dubious distinction was made between 'personal' and 'communal' lala rights with the obvious intention of isolating and defining a set of chiefly privileges that could be gradually whittled away. In the meantime personal lala was still authorized for housebuilding, garden planting, supplying visitors with food, cutting and building canoes, supplying turtle and making mats, masi cloth or other traditional manufactures. Chiefs were obliged - as they were by custom - to feed or pay those performing services. A village could arrange for

the commutation of personal services by making an annual payment in cash or kind. This provision was never acted upon, which suggests perhaps that personal lala was still accepted by the people as part of the customary order of things and not found over-burdensome.

The cornerstone of the 'communal system' remained - redefined in the Communal Services Regulation (7 of 1912). Individualism was fine as a slogan but when it came to the provision of essential day-to-day services such as the clearing of bush tracks between villages or of land for planting, the constant repairing of thatched houses, the housing of newly married couples, or the supplying of visitors (not least colonial officials) with food, the villages needed the cooperation of its able-bodied men for at least two or three days a week. The government accepted, for want of a practical alternative, that if village leaders were deprived of physical sanctions against the lazy, they needed the support of this regulation. With less justification, communal services were later extended to include the transport of government officers on duty, the carriage of official letters, and the assistance of Native Lands Commission surveyors.

The concentration of coercive power behind 'government work' and the reduced emphasis on hereditary privilege were keenly felt by chiefs of the old school, especially those who lacked administrative jobs. In 1912 Ratu Joni Maitatini of Rewa complained that the position of chiefs had become 'a pitiable one indeed. The privileges of the chiefs have been gradually withdrawn and to put it plainly in the English language he has become the "laughing stock" of the community. Surely those high chiefs need protection and support at the hands of the Government.'²⁰ Later instances of old-time personal lala on the grand scale are rare. On 7 April 1919, Ro Tuisawau of Rewa arrived in true chiefly style at Vabea in Kadavu and blew the conch shell for the Ono people to come together. He demanded that they give him over 4 tons of copra for which he had obligingly brought seventy empty bags. Lala vakavanua, traditional lala, Tuisawau called it - 'stealing', translated the European magistrate of Rewa, although he added that the chief would undoubtedly have been within his rights in years now gone.²¹

Ro Tuisawau was representative of many individual chiefs whose stars were in the descendant, whose lives did not fuse conveniently with the colonial ethos, who for lack

of education, or inclination, or a certain kind of personality, did not seize on the new possibilities for advancement and power in the Fijian Administration. Foremost amongst these chiefs were the 'dissidents of Bau', as they were known in government circles, a large group comprising the unemployed members of the four chiefly divisions (matagali) on the island. They were led by Ratu Etuate Wainiu, eldest but lowborn son of Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, thus a grandson of Cakobau. Wainiu had made a short career in the Armed Native Constabulary; likewise some of the others, including Ratu Joni Colata, Ratu Tevita Raivalita and Ratu Tevita Wilikinisoni Tuivanuvou, had held and lost government appointments.

These men were the sons of chiefs who had lived a life of violence and abundance, and who even after Cession had sailed their great canoes to collect tribute from most of the Lomaiviti group and many parts of Viti Levu - exactly which parts was already a matter of dispute. Wholesale abuse of their lala rights led Thurston to bar access to Lomaiviti by Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and the Bauan chiefs in 1894, and although for several years tribute continued to come on a voluntary basis, the Bauan chiefs found themselves chronically short of food.²² They had little land of their own, having at best indirect or secondary rights to lands occupied by their traditional vassals and allies. None of these rights was upheld by the Native Lands Commission. The Bauan chiefs were particularly embittered by their failure to gain part of the Namata lands directly opposite the island, a decision made in 1894.²³ The Namata people, originally from Namalata further north, occupied their lands at the pleasure of the Bauans, the chiefs argued, as did most of their neighbours in southern Tailevu. When some of these lands were sold between 1905 and 1907 the Bauans received nothing.

Ratu Joni Colata led a large delegation to the Native Commissioner in 1907 to put their grievances:

At the present day we see very many commoners coming to Suva to receive the rents of lands. We receive no portion of this money . . . Our position at Bau is an impossible one. At present nothing is brought to us with which to clothe ourselves or to provide oil for our lamps . . . Wherever we go we are the laughing stock of the people who receive money. They say, 'They are Chiefs - they have no lands.'²⁴

The chiefs were told that if they had particular claims to lands not yet registered by the NLC, they would be heard at the appropriate time but that past decisions were absolutely final. In 1908 the chiefs sent three strong letters in Ratu Etuate Wainiu's handwriting direct to im Thurn and advanced their general claims further: the disposal of the lands and of the commoners themselves was in the hands of the chiefs and the Bauans had inviolable rights particularly to lands in Tailevu and Lomaiviti. The present occupiers, they said, were not the true owners but tenants-at-will, 'squatting on the lands of us Bauans . . . visitors on our soil'.²⁵

On 14 May 1909 the chiefs set out these claims at great length in the first of several memorials to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, detailing the migration histories of the various 'squatters' of Tailevu to prove that their true lands lay elsewhere, and alleging a gross miscarriage of justice in the early hearings of the NLC. They made great play of the fact that their arch-enemy Ratu Marika Toroca, the hereditary Roko Tui Namata, had been a Native Lands Commissioner and a favourite of white officials. Had they realized at the time that Cession would bring an end to their rights and impoverish them, they would never have consented so readily. They had been misled, robbed of legitimate privileges.²⁶

If the details of their case were weak, the general thrust of the argument was strong enough for the government and the Colonial Office to consider privately the possibility of some compensation. A Downing Street official conceded: 'There can be no doubt that at the time of Cession, neither the chiefs of Bau (including Thakombau) nor the British Government had any intention of impoverishing the chiefs or of allowing the people to omit their customary payments.'²⁷ The chiefs sensed this chink in the armour and pursued the question with a persistence and bluntness that exasperated the government: 'These people will clutch at any straw to gain their ends and a little sympathy. Ratu Wainiu told me yesterday he would never stop agitating the question and that he had many more bullets to fire.'²⁸

The chiefs were doubtless aware that it was unlikely their literal claims would be accepted, but they hoped to secure a 5 per cent share of lease monies in all the Bauan dominions, which Wainiu maintained were the whole of Fiji.

In 1912 the government appointed a committee to discuss the distribution of rents. It was decided that the Bauans undoubtedly had rights of a general character over whole communities and districts such as the galivakabau, 'vassals to Bau', on Ovalau, Koro and Moturiki, but that these were sovereign rights and did not proceed from proprietorship of the soil, rights that had become meaningless when the colonial government assumed the protective role the more powerful chiefs had once played.²⁹ No change was recommended in the formula governing the distribution of rents by which the turaga i taukei, who received one-twentieth, was defined as the district chief of a vanua, not the high chiefs to whom most of the former owed allegiance.³⁰ However several witnesses from Lomaiviti were prepared to give the Vunivalu of Bau some share in the rents. 'We are related by blood to the Bau people', said the Buli Nairai, 'I would give 2s [a tenth share] to the Vunivalu' - likewise the Buli Nasinu (Ovalau), who acknowledged that the Vunivalu had the right to order them 'to do anything he wished'.³¹

The ownership of Lomaiviti lands was finally decided by the NLC in 1915.³² The chiefs made strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to salvage their rights by seeking co-ownership of the disputed lands. Finally in February 1917 a commission was appointed to ascertain which Bauan chiefs could properly require lala and from which people, and whether it was 'possible to arrange for the commutation of such personal services by a lump sum payment or by an annuity'.³³ A notice in Na Mata, January 1917, required Bauan chiefs to fill in a written claim form. This was done by Ratu Pope Seniloli, E. Wainiu, and five of the latter's supporters. The commission gathered some interesting evidence on past Bauan relationships but never completed its work. Wainiu predictably made claim to 'vakatadumata to the whole of Fiji', that is, to send envoys with requests to those parts of the group Bau was unable to rule directly.³⁴

The question of compensation remained unresolved until a further memorial from the Bauan chiefs to the Secretary of State in 1921 provoked Governor Sir Cecil Rodwell to suggest that the issues be shelved for all time by a 'final and more or less arbitrary settlement by the Governor'.³⁵ Several hundred acres of Crown land on Koro - valued at about f4000 - was the pay-off, 'our final gift to the Bauans', formally given over by Rodwell at Bau on 13 November 1922.³⁶ At a meeting with the chiefs on Koro in

January 1923, A. L. Armstrong on behalf of the government felt the need to remind them that the Governor had the whole of Fiji to control and

could not devote his time exclusively to Bau. The Secretary of State had under his control many millions of people and territories so vast that they could not even imagine them. To think that he would reconsider a question already settled concerning a tiny island which could not even be found on a map . . . showed a very false conception of the relative importance of the Bauans.³⁷

The chiefs agreed that in accepting the lands they relinquished all claims to compensation for the loss of rights or privileges formerly enjoyed. Ratu Wainiu and two others (Ratu Tuisavura and Ratu Rusiate Busa) declined to accept the agreement. Wainiu, defiant to the end, lived to a great age and on the death of Ratu Pope Seniloli in 1936 he was chosen to act as Vunivalu, a position he held for nearly twenty years. In 1937 he made a further appeal to a new Governor (Sir Arthur Richards) suggesting he receive 5s in the £ from all the lands leased in Fiji.

I am Edward Wainiu a direct descendant of Ratu Cakobau . . .
I pray that you will have pity on me and do your utmost to see that a just and fair portion of the Fiji Government money will be given to me annually that I may rightfully enjoy the rest of my days as befitting a grandson of Ratu Cakobau.³⁸

The Bauans, he said, had been 'left in poverty like a lot of drifting people' but it was only true of those Bauans and other chiefs who could not turn the colonial situation to their own advantage.

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