

Chapter 5

The continuities of village life and politics

Until World War II more than eight out of ten Fijians were in villages - not haphazard hamlets strewn through the countryside but hierarchically structured groups of villages organized within and without by interlocking administrative, political and customary arrangements. The lines of official authority were clear and hinged on the office of Buli, the government-appointed district chief usually in charge of 200-600 people in about three or four villages. After twenty years' experience in charge of the Colo provinces, Walter Carew had argued in 1896 that the Rokos 'could be dispensed with any day without any evil results' - and in the decades following they often were - but 'if there is one thing more certain than another in Native Politics it is that we must not wilfully run counter to the Bulis but must support them and their dignity all we can.'¹

It is tempting to suggest that in fact the only reason the Bulis did survive so long in the twentieth century (to the 1960s) was because no one could devise a cheaper system of local government. Bulis were given little support and recognition. Conversely they were comparatively free to rule their districts much as they liked, and rural life had long developed its own momentum. Just as the traditional model of vanua (federation) with its preoccupations, loyalties and emotions infused the government district or tikina, so the chiefly model of the head of a vanua - usually styled Tui in modern times (Tui Nadi, Tui Bua, etc.) - governed the role expectations of the Buli. In practice it was not feasible for a commoner to hold the post. If he did so, on the appointment of a European official, then he had to give his orders legitimacy by seeking the approval of the acknowledged leaders of the vanua. The appointment of a man who was both an outsider and a commoner was an outrage that seems to have occurred only once - Colo West in 1909 - and the man died within a month of taking office. The ancestors had a way of looking after these things.²

By regulation, if not also by custom, the Buli enjoyed the chiefly privileges of lala, although this seldom amounted to more than a day's desultory work in his garden each month. He also received 5 per cent share in lease monies, an amount that was significant (more than £50) in

about six sugar-cane tikina (Nailaga, Bulu, and Sekituru in Ba; Labasa, Naitasiri, and Nausori). Elsewhere it was a few shillings to a few pounds, no real compensation for an annual salary that was £6 to £12 at the beginning of the century and £18 to £24 after 1927. The lowest clerk in the civil service was twice as well paid as the man generally acknowledged to be the lynchpin of the Fijian Administration.

Apparently then the Buli was not in the first instance a civil servant so much as a subsidized chief. He was already at the apex of a self-sufficient little world that provided its own rewards: style, the power of keeping the peace, the dignity of presiding over the eternal flow of goods and services. If he chose not to conform to the chiefly expectations of his role, then he was depriving himself of the only rewards offered him. And yet, the same man was responsible for the implementation of all the orders of the Roko, the magistrates, the provincial council, and the entire body of Native Regulations.

Of all the Buli's government duties the most onerous and most important was the collection of his district's tax assessment and provincial rate (a total of some £35,000 from all the provinces). Ratu Sukuna once wrote a sensitive account of the Buli's dilemma:

Unlike his Biblical prototype who waxed fat on taxes and not on the love of Jews, the Buli fattens rather on the goodwill of his people, taxes for him being nothing but a temptation leading to ruin. Hence all that any of his brethren has to say to him to delay payment is au sa leqa, which is being interpreted, I can't pay. Knowing that the anger of authority is far away, but the displeasure of the people at his door, the Buli being one of them construes the saying liberally and replies, sa vinaka which means, all right. And so it goes on, a perfectly natural and intelligible proceeding.³

In the district or tikina, the Buli presided over a thoroughly ambiguous institution. Legally the Bulis and their district councils were responsible to the Rokos and the provincial councils, the European magistrates and finally the Governor (through his deputy, the Secretary for Native Affairs or Talai). The Native Regulations gave the district councils at first sight minimal direct

responsibility. The areas listed read as though they were the wishful thinking of a sanitary inspector:

There shall be in each district a Council called the District Council . . . consisting of the Buli of the district, the chiefs of towns, and the chiefs of qalis and mataqalis in the district and any other person or persons directed to attend by the Buli . . .

The Council may make rules affecting any or all of the following matters:

1. public bathing places;
2. keeping the villages clean and the planting of couch grass therein;
3. the removal of rubbish;
4. the planting of gardens;
5. village paths and bridges;
6. house building;
7. any other matter concerning the health and good government of the district; and these rules shall be submitted to the Roko of the province for his approval.⁴

It was of course the 'any other matter' of the last clause that gave the council significance in the lives of the people. Tikina councils did not eagerly assemble to discuss village trash problems but primarily to arrange 'the affairs of the land', na ka vakavanua. And even the routine items of the official agenda would be coloured by local personalities and kinship politics:

The resignation and appointment of Turaga ni Koros, concealing discussion on suitability and status; the planting of food crops, which doubtless produced arguments about season and quantity; the need for better water supplies, involving the decision to break such and such family ties; the renovation of village drains, which brought up the complicated subject of providing food for all communal workers; the

tabu on nuts for the payment of the [Provincial] Rate, where compromises were proposed and considered; applications for exemption from communal services, in which the characters of the applicants were lauded and attacked. Clearly then these Councils play a large part in the life of villagers.⁵

At no stage was there an attempt to regulate the procedures followed in these councils. The idiom was that of local custom. The chiefs and their spokesmen (matanivanua) sat on fine mats at the innermost end of an ordinary village dwelling facing down to the customary yaqona bowl and its attendants. The village elders sat facing the chiefs from the other sides of the room, ranged according to the local table of precedence. The meeting was begun with a yaqona ceremony with its implicit invocation of the ancestral spirits, though hallowed by a prayer to the God of the Sabbath. Conventions of etiquette and oratory applied as much to the tikina councils as they did to any other assembly of the land.

Provincial councils by contrast were more formal affairs, held only once a year and usually attended by a European officer from the Native Department. They were heavily dominated by the routine requirements of government work, mainly the raising of taxes and the allocation of provincial resources to public works. But the gathering of so many people in one place, up to two hundred delegates and their attendants, made the provincial councils the major social event of the year, a festival of the people with much exchange of property, mekes and feasts on the side.

A typical report of the Provincial Council of Colo East gives some glimpse of the priorities of the people on these occasions.

The proceedings were opened with the usual ceremonies followed by a huge magiti [feast] for the two thousand odd people present. After four hours of keen discussion, Council adjourned for further feasting and mekes and after the second session of Council, the proceedings closed with a well-practised meke from the women of Muaira, followed by the dividing of the spoils and all districts' veisau [exchange].⁶

Only in this social context did the provincial councils match the importance of the monthly tikina councils as a liturgy, so to speak, a celebration of corporate identity and common ideals on the one hand, a reaffirmation of the dignity and status of each constituent group on the other. The district and provincial councils provided a congenial forum for making decisions required by the colonial government without doing violence to traditional decision-making processes and preferred forms of social intercourse and collaboration. It would be a pointless exercise to attempt, as scholars have done with colonial institutions affecting land, to filter out those activities of the councils which were 'authentically' Fijian from those which were pseudo-customary colonial innovations. It is more to the point to argue that the very success of the original Gordon-Thurston design in maintaining a strong rural Fijian corporate life preserved also the capacity and inclination of the people to assert their own priorities and modify the intrusions of the western economic order espoused by the European and Indian communities.

Much of Fijian village life was governed by day-to-day subsistence tasks and communal labour obligations. Fortunately there were many 'great occasions' such as the marriages and deaths of high chiefs to enliven the year with expectation and a heightened sense of living. Some festivities involved weeks of preparation. The Wesleyan missionary at Lakeba reported in June 1918 that Lau had been 'holding high festival for a month' to lift the mourning for Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (died 1901):

It has been continual round of 'magitis' [feasts], mekes, boses [councils], sports . . . Surely not less than 500 visitors and possibly nearly 1000, were here from every island in Lau. Not one buli, n.m. [native minister], catechist or chief worth the name was absent. As many as 17 cutters were in the harbour at any one time . . . Dalo by the 10 thousands, yams and nearly a score of bullocks, etc., pigs and turtles in even larger numbers. The goods [for the solevu, exchange] consisted of three large canoes, gatu [snakes], mats, magimagi, [sinnet, braided cordage of coconut fibre] . . .⁷

The quarterly and annual circuit meetings of the Wesleyan church, to which four out of five Fijians belonged, were often accompanied by spectacular exchanges and gifts of property with district vying with district not to be disgraced by a poor showing. A wooden slit drum (lali) would announce the beginning of a procession into the village green. As the women danced and sang, glistening warriors might carry on their shoulders a fully rigged canoe bearing in the prow a muscular youth blowing into a conch shell to herald 'the approach to land'. The canoe would be lowered to reveal a wealth of fruits and marine delicacies, while others brought in young bullocks, pigs, turtles and crabs. Long lines of women would follow with seamless fathoms of painted masi cloth and beautiful mats, lay them before the chiefs and join the seated chorus. Men would enter with bunches of bananas and coconuts to pile in mounds before taking up club or spear for their war meke. The appreciative semi-circle of spectators and rivals vastly enjoyed the music, pageantry and general air of munificence on these occasions.⁸ Only the presence of a gratified missionary or occasionally a European official amongst the chiefs reminded the people of the chill colonial order that discounted such manifestations of corporate pride. At best they were tolerated as pleasant but unproductive echoes of the glories of older Fijian economic and social life.

Apart from the festivals of church and state, there endured well into the 1920s and 1930s traditional trading networks that supplied from the surplus of one region the deficiencies of another. At Lomaiwai in Nadroga the people made salt in the mangrove flats and smoked it in cylinders of fibre so that it could be transported to Rewa and traded for pots, to Vatulele for choice masi, Kadavu for mats, Lau for rope-fibre or wooden bowls, Colo for yaqona, timber and bamboos, upper Serua for kauri gum (makadre) used for glazing pots and making torches. Apparently the specialties of each region were well known and in the predominantly social context of customary exchanges there was no incentive, even if the resources were present, for one region to challenge the monopoly of another. It was never the object of trade to make a profit in the commercial sense:

The important thing is not that the exchange is trade, but that the framework within which it takes place is primarily social, not economic. The economic relationship is brought about

because of the social relationship; the economic need is solved through a social mechanism; the economic transaction gives expression to an already existing social relationship part of whose function is to satisfy this type of need . . .⁹

Even if the quality of district life prior to World War II eludes documentation other than the repeated verbal eulogies of old people pining for the good old days of ordered life and simple plenty, it seems that the tikina was an institution ideally suited to give Fijians effective direction of their own local affairs and satisfaction of their material and social needs. It was still strong enough in 1939 for the Secretary for Native Affairs to claim that not a single Fijian was destitute or homeless, a situation simply taken for granted at the time but one which takes on retrospective interest with the recent recognition of rural destitution as a serious problem in some parts of contemporary Fiji.¹⁰ In Ratu Sukuna's words spoken in 1944 after 11,000 Fijians had passed through the armed services:

There can be nothing spiritually very wrong with a system that maintains the old and the sick without resort to homes for the aged and schemes of social security, that despite discouragement and discrimination comes forward in times of stress and danger to help the larger community of which it forms a part.¹¹

Secondly, there was throughout the inter-war period a remarkable absence of serious crime in the provinces. Between 1930 and 1939 in Lau, times of acute depression for the copra industry, the annual reports of the District Commissioner mention up to a dozen major cases a year but nothing more serious than adultery, larceny or assault. In 1936 and 1937 not a single serious offence such as aggravated assault came before the courts.¹² Again, such a situation was taken for granted, though there was a great deal of minor court work, mainly for failure to pay rates and taxes. Even if the court statistics concealed the real level of crime in the community, they testify to the efficacy of a social system able to dispense with the assistance of the courts in maintaining peace and achieving reconciliation.

That is not to say social harmony precluded a vigorous political life, but district politics interacted rather little with wider colonial affairs and could often be withheld from effective official surveillance. Or when the Fijian Administration did become formally involved, the real issues were frequently misunderstood in Suva. The success of some of the Nadrau people in the centre of Viti Levu, for instance, in breaking away in 1920 to form a new tikina of their own - a process of subdivision that occurred elsewhere one hundred times between 1875 and 1944 - grew out of eight formal petitions, fourteen years of passive resistance to the chiefs of Nadrau, and memories of local wars that went back well before Gordon's 'Little War' of 1876 in the interior. (Nadrau had been rewarded for its 'loyalty to the Crown' with enlarged district boundaries.)¹³

Local hostilities and rivalries, ever a feature of Fijian life, generated intense feelings, though as Nation observed of Fiji in the 1970s, parochialism had a paradoxical community-building function as well.¹⁴ The relative rigidity of the Fijian Administration, the lack of arms, and eventual invocation of colonial law ensured a compromise or at least a stalemate in the end - though not without periods of paralysis which underlined both the dependence of chiefly leadership on administrative support and the frustrations of alternative leaders.

Ratu Penioni Ravoka, the hereditary chief styled Ratu mai Verata, was one such leader who could not bear the constraints of colonial order. In ancient times (not so long ago to the Ratu), Verata or Ucunivanua had headed a powerful confederation (matanitu) of tribes and enjoyed extensive lands and a large population. The chief's village lay some 26 miles north of Bau, with whom common ancestors were recognized. Early in the nineteenth century Bau challenged Verata's hegemony. Naulivou, the Vunivalu of Bau, defeated Verata in battle. Verata retaliated some years later with a massacre of a party of Bauans visiting Waimaro, whereupon Cakobau forced the unwilling allies of Bau to join forces and lay siege to Verata.

In colonial times the power of Verata was a memory kept alive by their resentment of the prominence of Bauans in the Fijian Administration, and especially in Tailevu province. Shackled by the pax britannica, the Verata chiefs and people resorted to the arts of petty annoyance and impudence. In 1890 Ratu Epeli Nailatikau (Roko Tui of Tailevu) complained that the Verata people had cut up the

nets of his fishermen, the Lasakau; and when he had gaoled a Verata man on Bau island, 'instead of making use of the gaol water closet he used to go to the one belonging to the Lasakau people and pull parts of the thatch out for his own convenience'. When provincial taxes were due from Verata the young men set sail for the Yasawas or Koro; when they were at home they drank yagona day and night and brawled at will.¹⁵

This reputation for lawlessness continued down to the 1930s. Ratu Penioni Ravoka was a wild eccentric man. In 1915, it was later alleged by the chiefs of Tailevu, he declared himself completely independent 'even as regards the King'. When accused by Buli Nakelo and twenty-four other chiefs in 1921 of trying to divide the province of Tailevu into two, the Ratu countered that it would be a good thing: 'I want a separate province to prove my zeal for the government, for it is a long time that we have been relying on Bau and our hearts are not in it.' In July of the same year, Ratu Peni fired several shots in dubious salute as the Roko lay off the reef at Verata waiting for the turn of the tide.¹⁶

Apenisa Lawenitotoka, the Bauan appointed to replace the rebellious chief as Buli, was powerless in Verata; on one occasion he was threatened and ordered to leave the town when he requested food for workers on Bau. Verata made no contribution to the feasts and the meke dances of the Tailevu Provincial Council in June 1922. Apenisa confessed to the government in April 1923 that his instructions were ignored in Verata: if Suva did not intervene then the Ratu might as well be reinstated as Buli. Apenisa was removed and a higher-ranking Bauan, Ratu Waqalevu, appointed Buli Verata from 1 July 1923. The people refused to build him a house and he retreated to Bau. Then Ratu Peni began to intimidate the Vunivalu of Bau's servants (kai vale) at nearby Kumi. All Fiji was talking about the dispute.¹⁷

Bau felt that its prestige was at stake. The Rokos of Cakaudrove, Bau, Ra, Macuata and Lau were prevailed on to appeal to the Governor for his 'chiefly ruling' (lewa vakaturaga): 'The people of Verata are steeped in insolence and scorn our traditional customs of courteous dealing . . . [Unless punished] the spirit of foolishness and the spirit of discord will grow amongst the people of the land and they will come to despise their chiefs.'¹⁸ At the Council of Chiefs in 1923 it was suggested that the old

Ratu was insane and ought to be locked up. However when the European magistrate of Rewa visited Verata in March 1924, he was hospitably received and was able to arrange for the Bauan Buli to retire in favour of a second ranking chief of Verata (Laitia Drevuata).¹⁹

The Veratan example was, as the high chiefs had feared, infectious. In 1925 the Tailevu Provincial Council representatives revolted against the 'customary' demands of the chiefs of Bau to have the repair of their houses put on the provincial program of work. When Ratu Pope Seniloli, the Vunivalu of Bau, appealed to them to remember their old customs, 'there was no response and it was quite obvious from the attitude of the people that they were unwilling even to consider the proposal'. Although there were fifty-six houses on Bau in a bad way, only seven of the 200 delegates would agree to include the building in the program of work. The whole burden fell to the home tikina of Bau with the result that the chiefly island became more and more decrepit. (The Provincial Council partly relented in 1929 and offered to repair one house for each tikina).²⁰

In 1930 Verata took to the attack again. The Buli defended his tikina against another charge of non-compliance with the Provincial Council resolutions on housebuilding: 'Verata did not owe allegiance (vakarorogo) to Bau in ancient times nor does it now'. The practice of using government institutions to achieve housebuilding on Bau was corrupt, he argued; there was a customary way of sending envoys (mata) with such requests, and a customary way of complying which had better regard for the dignity of the parties than did the threat of prosecution. Who were the Bauans to talk of upholding ancient customs?²¹

The Veratan challenge was taken seriously by Bau and the whole chiefly order. Ratu Sukuna regarded it as a conflict that 'had repercussions through the whole length and breadth of the Fijian Social System'.²² The government of the day had little interest in Fijian politics and was glad to delegate to Ratu Sukuna the resolution of this dispute (and several similar disputes). A special hearing of the Native Lands Commission was held on 7 September 1933 at Naimasimasi, half-way between the contending seats. Both sides attended in force, and with much ceremonial skirmishing. Proceedings began with a 'fine conciliatory speech' by Ratu Aseri Latianara of Serua (sitting as Assessor) and both sides gave evidence 'without rancour', perhaps because Ratu Peni declined to appear personally.

Ratu Sukuna ruled in favour of Bau.²³ Ratu Peni had one last moment of glory in October 1935 when he ordered the Roman Catholic and Wesleyan mission staff to leave their houses and gardens. He was arrested and committed to the Lunatic Asylum in Suva.²⁴ For it is written in the hearts of Fijians that those who defy chiefly authority will become sick or insane.

If the issues and preoccupations of the chiefs and people in these affairs seem excessively parochial, the scale minute, and the general orientation towards past glory or old grievances rather than colonialist desiderata such as economic prosperity or the national interest, then it is a true reflection of the nature of Fijian societies prior to World War II - and the background for understanding the failure of alien concepts of progress to take root amongst the people. And yet Fiji was to produce at least one man who tried to inspire the people to transcend local parochialism and grasp a vision of progress larger than Ratu Sukuna and his peers were willing to countenance.

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