

Chapter 6

Apolosi R. Nawai and the Viti Company

If Ratu Sukuna was to become the statesman of Fiji, Apolosi R. Nawai was its underworld hero - the only man from the ranks of ordinary villagers who rivalled the statesman for eloquence, personal mana, and a compelling vision of the future of Fijians in their own country. Ratu Sukuna's claims to leadership rested not only on his noble blood lines, but on his Oxford-given ability to hold his own amongst the most educated men in the colonial service and yet articulate a coherent philosophy of Fijian values dear to himself and inherent - so he said - in the psychology of individual Fijians and in the dynamics of Fijian community life. Apolosi's forebears in the Yasawas and in Narewa, Nadi (where he was born about 1876) were so insignificant that he went to fantastic lengths later in his life to invent for himself a lost line of chiefs. His followers, including many chiefs, did not dispute his claim to be descended from the ulumatua, first-born, of a legendary canoe of ancestral heroes supposed to have landed at Vuda Point in western Viti Levu.

Perhaps Apolosi's true spiritual ancestors were rooted less in the world of chiefly power than in the dark substratum of Fijian life, the forces of the occult. No account of the Fijian colonial experience can avoid some confrontation with the enduring beliefs of Fijians in supernatural intervention by the ancestral spirits and some of the old gods such as the great shark Dakuwaqa. Draunikau, sorcery, survived as an adjunct to personal malice and political ambition: it remained a phenomenon of perennial interest and fear in the lives of the people. In the popular mind any man who rose to great power and influence had unseen hosts, as it were, at his personal command. Belief in the occult forces of the spirit world was implicit in the mana of the chiefs (for Christian preaching had done little to undermine the aura of 'legitimate authority'). Certain groups such as the world-famous firewalkers of Beqa and the little-known turtle-callers of Nacamaki on Koro openly celebrated their obligations to the spirits. And occasionally the same forces were focused in the leadership claims of prophets without honour in their colonial homes.

Apolosi grew up around Nadi on the western side of Viti Levu - Yasayasa Ra - and in his early career called himself, when he wanted his admirers to ponder the anomaly of his ostensibly humble origins, na kai Ra, the man from Ra. The phrase would also remind his audience of the long-standing but repressed hostility the speakers of Fiji's western dialects - often incomprehensible to easterners - felt towards the domination of the Fijian Administration by Bauan chiefs and their allies. The appointment of men such as Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi to be Roko Tui of Ba and the Yasawas had lowered the national prestige of the province; the difficulty of governing Ba and rapid increase of its Indian cane-growing population led to its subdivision in 1920 into the small provinces of Ba, Nadi and Lautoka, all under direct European rule.

In the popular mind, these provinces, and the adjoining ones of Colo North and Ra, were indisputably the home not only of ancestral heroes but of wild and defiant men. Drauniivi on the northwest boundary of Ra province was the home of Navosavakadua's Tuka cult in the colony's first decades. When Apolosi was a village lad in Nadi, 'Navosa' had proclaimed the imminent return of the twin gods, Nacirikaumoli and Nakausabaria, the authentic originals of the deceitful Wesleyans' substitutes, Jehovah and Jesus. They were to usher in a new age when Fijians would rule their own land again and the whiteskins would be driven into the sea. Believers were promised nothing less than Tuka, immortal life or eternal youth; unbelievers would be annihilated.¹

Although Navosa died in exile in 1897, his followers kept the movement alive in the interior, where there were few signs of government power, little education, and men not at all unwilling to be identified as bete, priests - though perhaps not on Sunday, when as in every village of Fiji the population went to church and sang praises to the Lord God of Hosts Who knows all things but Who truly blesses the Fijian people, a villager might explain, with great mana.

Doubtless the young Apolosi was steeped in this accommodating theology of village life, and surely he heard the miracle stories of the prophet - how the British had put Navosa through the rollers of a mill without extracting a drop of his blood, then bound him in weighted ropes and buried him alive at sea en route to Rotuma only to find him on arrival dangling his legs over the end of the wharf

waiting to greet his captors.² When Apolosi joined the lucky few to progress beyond a few years of village education and enter the Wesleyan central school at Navuloa (at the mouth of the Rewa), he was already thoroughly versed in the pre-scientific psychology of his people, and later revealed a remarkable capacity to validate his leadership ambitions by arcane references to both scriptural and traditional symbols. Where Ratu Sukuna relied on hereditary status, western education, prestige in the colonial establishment and closely reasoned appeals to history, anthropology and natural justice to advance his conceptions of the needs of the Fijian people, Apolosi spoke directly to the heart; he addressed the actual perceptions of the people in the language they understood.

In the first decade of the century those perceptions often were that Fijians were coming to occupy an inferior place in the colony's economy, that the future lay with the Europeans and, to a growing extent, the Indians, and that the chiefs of the land, more especially those who sheltered their privileges within the ranks of the Fijian Administration, were unequal to the task of satisfying the material aspirations of their people.

The collapse of Thurston's taxation scheme and marketing organization had bound Fijians hand and foot to European and Chinese traders buying produce in small lots and selling merchandise at atrocious prices. The Planters' Petition of 1908 seeking the confiscation of 'unused' Fijian lands and the knowledge that it had the support of their Supreme Chief Sir Everard im Thurn had created - in Ratu Sukuna's own words - 'an atmosphere of troubled suspicion . . . for the first time perhaps since Cession'.³ The European magistrates were successfully striving to increase their direct executive authority at the expense of Fijian officials. Sydney Smith, one time Provincial Inspector in western Viti Levu, was at large in Macuata openly contemptuous of those 'very useless officials' the Bulis: when they came to 'squat' in his office he told them they were an avaricious lot, greedy for Indian rents while deservedly rotting as a result of 'their own laziness'.⁴ In 1913 the magistrates were restyled District Commissioners (Provincial Commissioners if there was no Roko) and assigned the duties of any government department, including for the first time direct oversight of Fijian affairs.⁵ New Rokos were styled Native Assistants, on about half the salary of a senior Roko Tui, and with no share of rent monies. Young Englishmen or

local Europeans, 'often completely ignorant of native customs and modes of thought', were given broad discretionary power.⁶ All correspondence had to pass through them, an insult to chiefs like Ratu Aseri Latianara or Ratu Pope Seniloli, the Vunivalu of Bau.

In the same year, 1913, Apolosi emerged into the public eye. He and a minor chief from Bau, Ratu J. Tabaiwalu, had for some time been leaders of a team of carpenters based at the new mission training institute at Davuilevu, outside Suva. They took contracts to build those capacious wooden churches which had become, along with sailing cutters for coastal villages, a status symbol of communal pride and an incessant drain on the meagre capital resources of the villagers. Oral traditions on the Wainibuka River have it that the team was building a church at Korovatu near Vunidawa in 1911 or 1912 when Apolosi first began to canvass village meetings with his scheme to start a Fiji company. He was then in his early thirties, young for a Fijian to assert leadership, and he had to be careful to avoid showing his disrespect for the established order.

Was it a perception of the senseless capital waste in oversized churches, or the procession of European-owned punts taking Fiji's bananas down the Rewa tributaries to Suva, or was it compassion for the villagers hammering up banana cases for a pittance that finally inspired Apolosi, with eloquence still remembered in those parts, to transcend all bounds of etiquette and make a bold plea for innovation? He said later he had lived in blindness for years until he suddenly realized that the only way the itaukei could get a fair deal was to compete directly in the economy and keep the export and import of food and produce in their own hands. First they could cut out the white buyers who controlled the river trade, then the agents in Suva, then perhaps the shipping lines . . . Why could not Fijians pool their capital in one vast company, learn the skills, invest the profits, and above all enjoy the dividends that flowed from their land and their labour straight into a few whitemen's pockets as surely as the Rewa River emptied into the sea? His countrymen lived like the Hebrews weeping beside the river of Babylon longing for their land to be restored to them. They should steel themselves, be strong and determined (yalo qaga). Or would they forever be content to let foreigners develop their lands and employ them casually for 2s a day - less, he noted, than a whiteman in Suva spent on feeding his horse.⁷

These were powerful themes that spoke to a people's pride, challenged their submissiveness to the whole framework of their lives, and compounded their anxiety about the future of the race.

When Apolosi said 'We Fijians' to people with whom he had no connection or status, he was speaking a new language, cutting across the intense parochial bonds that kept the constituent groups at every level of Fijian society and administration dependent on chiefs for leadership and initiative. His stroke of genius was to avoid an overt challenge to the chiefs and find a new basis for legitimacy in the western model of a company of shareholders united solely on the basis of their capital contribution and the specific aims of modern enterprise, and delegating control of all operations to a managing director. Undoubtedly he had heard of a similar Tongan company and the rumoured prosperity of its members. Apolosi neither understood nor cared for the legal details of company organization - he gambled that the symbols of status, the business titles, an impressive office, the company letterhead and above all the shareholders' meetings would validate his scheme in the eyes of the people. It was still essential, though, to create the impression that the powers of the land were at least tacitly in support, giving the Company, as Ratu Sukuna later explained, 'the chiefly authority it would have otherwise lacked'.⁸ Many chiefs who were without government appointments, or had lost them, notably the 'dissidents of Bau', Ro Tuisawau (a high chief of Rewa), and the hereditary chief styled Ratu mai Verata at various times lent their prestige to Company 'committees' and 'boards' or attended meetings in the early years.

Government only became aware of the Viti Company at the end of 1913 when Apolosi's agents began to solicit 'share' subscriptions from chiefs and people in nearly every part of the group. The promoters claimed government approval, prompting an official warning to the people in Na Mata not to be duped by a company that was not known to the government.⁹ Shareholders were asked to sell produce only to their Company and be content with a lower price until its offices were properly established in Suva. The people of Lutu and most of their neighbours on the tributaries of the Rewa River gave their bananas without payment to Apolosi's agents; the islanders of Nayau in Lau province gave him their copra, and one district in Ra province handed over its entire tax money. The Company aroused

great excitement in all parts of the group and was widely attributed to the inspiration of the twin gods Nacirikaumoli and Nakausabaria, a suggestion Apolosi did nothing to dispel. In January 1914 Joni Kuruduadua, an old Fijian servant of the government in the interior, roused himself from retirement to warn that the Company's objects were said to be the return of the lands alienated to Europeans before Cession, the takeover of all European and Indian stores by Fijians with some to be sent to establish markets overseas, the abolition of government taxes and the eventual expulsion of all Europeans from Fiji - not to mention 'other reports which it is not seemly to relate'.¹⁰

Kuruduadua's reticence almost certainly alludes to the revival in the highlands of obscene meke performed for the old gods, with some rather disturbing new lyrics:

Fijian prepare for battle!
 Close in with bayonets drawn.
 Apolosi and his boys will win;
 Wait for his word of command.
 Hurl the whiteskins out to sea
 Or make them cook and wash
 And carry away our trash
 Their feet will be posts for our
 houses;
 Sew up their tongues for our sails;
 Gouge out their eyes for inkwells.
 Hail Apolosi, firstborn king!
 Lead our land to freedom
 Lead us to happiness.¹¹

Apolosi issued orders to the Bulis of eastern Viti Levu to assemble with their people at Draubuta village in the Rewa delta for the hoisting of the Company flag on 29 April 1914. When the Secretary for Native Affairs, K.J. Allardyce, told the Bulis by circular letter that in no circumstances were they to take their orders from the Viti Company, Apolosi and Ratu J. Tabaiwalu countered with a circular of their own, impressively typed, saying that Allardyce's letter was 'foolish indeed' as there was no law to prevent the collection of money or the formation of a company. Allardyce urged that Apolosi be exiled forthwith under the Confining Ordinance (III of 1887) originally designed to remove Navosavakadua to Rotuma without trial. Governor Sir Ernest Bickham Sweet Escott, fatally ignorant of the interpretation Fijians would place on his caution, allowed the meeting to go ahead. He feared 'a false step'.

Was not the government now anxious that 'the communal system with its paralysing influence on individual effort and ambition should be broken down'? Apolosi's Viti Company could herald a healthy new phase in the Fijians' transition from simple subsistence to a liberal economy. The protests of the threatened European banana interest had to be balanced against the government tradition of strong protection for the legitimate aspirations of the Fijians.¹²

That certainly was not the view of the traditional leaders of the Fijians, the high chiefs. The Tui Nayau (Roko Tui of Lau in his government capacity) was one of the first to try and discredit the Company. Apolosi, he reported, had arrived in state at the island of Nayau with £70 worth of gifts to exchange for women. At a district church meeting (polotu) Apolosi boasted that he did not honour anyone in Fiji, neither white, red nor black, nor any Governor, Roko or magistrate. To dramatize the point he tore up summonses issued by the European magistrate at Lomaloma. Finally, warned the Roko, Apolosi was advising the people not to pay their debts to the Europeans.¹³ The other chiefs had their first opportunity to discuss the Company at the Council of Chiefs in May 1914. They were assured by the Buli of Nadi that Apolosi and his brother Kiniviliame were 'people of no position' and that they had both been driven out of Nadi. The Viti Company was the work of young upstarts, an affront to chiefly prerogatives. The Council urged the government to prohibit the collection of money for an unregistered company and to prosecute the promoters. A shrewd chief of Kadavu added that as long as Apolosi and his followers were allowed to make their boasts with impunity, the people would assume tacit government approval for the venture. The chiefs were acutely aware of Apolosi's need to give the Company the aura of their authority before the people would rally to its flag.¹⁴

In a predicament created by its own mood of liberalism, the government replied that only the misuse of money was unlawful. Apolosi must be legally convicted of an offence before the Viti Company's activities could be constrained. As no one could be found who would testify in court to his squandering of money held in trust, the man from Ra had free rein to develop his organization. To heighten the impression of a great chiefly enterprise he appointed a large number of Company officials with authoritative-sounding titles. Almost every Buli in the District Administration was flanked by a 'Manager' while the government village chiefs, the turaga ni koro, were in

many places virtually replaced with Company nominees bearing the same title. Similarly he appointed ovisa to correspond with provincial constables, and threatened to fine or imprison the enemies of the Company. It was as though there were two governments in Fiji, complained the Roko Tui of Macuata.¹⁵

Promoters of the Company carried its messages and instructions from village to village, stirring up enthusiasm and collecting funds. Apolosi was later to claim, and it was doubtless the case, that he had little control over what they said and did in the name of the Viti Company. Nor was there much that a handful of overworked magistrates could do to monitor their movements. In August a levy of £10 was demanded from every district and the membership fee fixed at £1. In the banana-rich villages of the Rewa delta Apolosi proclaimed that anyone selling to Europeans would be prosecuted by the Company and imprisoned. The Provincial Commissioner of Colo East reported that rather than sell to European buyers offering cash on the spot, the people were burying their bananas. The government began to realize that intervention would soon be necessary: it was simply a question of the length of the rope.¹⁶

When it came to the disposal of bananas, copra, and other produce, Apolosi was compelled to work with Europeans already in the business. Although the details of his dealing are not documented, it seems the Viti Company had its own inter-island cutters and river punts - essential status symbols - but used established firms to handle overseas shipments. Seeing a chance to capitalize on Fijian patriotism, five Suva businessmen went ahead without Apolosi and legally incorporated a company called the Viti Company with a capital of 10,000 shares at £1 each, 5 per cent on allotment. A certificate to commence business was issued on 16 January 1915. The memorandum of association provided for all the business activities Apolosi had urged Fijians to take on themselves: the marketing of Fijian produce and traditional manufactures, the management of wholesale and retail stores, importing and exporting, shipbuilding, insurance, banking and auctioneering. However the board was always to have five of its seven members Europeans and in the first instance no Fijians were appointed.¹⁷

In letters to the Governor and the press the European directors denounced the use of the Company's name by Apolosi or anyone else to collect funds. For his part, Apolosi seized on this parasitical Viti Company's legal standing to impress or confuse the people with the legality of the original Viti Company in its diffuse semi-political form. In January 1915 he brought some 3000-4000 people back to Draubuta for meetings and celebrations lasting nearly a month. (In oral traditions this meeting is often telescoped into the first and regarded as the real inauguration of the Company.) Apolosi addressed the crowd from a high stage hung with a hundred tabua (whales' teeth). Ro Tuisawau, dissident high chief of Rewa, is said to have presented Apolosi with a large tabua, to confer on him a chiefly mandate to ensure the prosperity of the whole country. Many minor chiefs and ex-government officials were present, as well as five Bulis of Colo East expressly forbidden to attend. The meeting is poorly documented but apparently Apolosi used it to bolster his claim to be the true leader of the Viti Company, for shortly afterwards he warned the Bulis of Nadroga they should cease their hostility to the company 'lest you incur serious trouble'. Did they not understand that the Viti Company had been duly registered and had legal authority?¹⁸

In March 1915 Apolosi faced a crisis. The first annual general meeting of the legal Viti Company in the Suva Town Hall was to be held on the 27th; hundreds of Viti Company shareholders (of both companies) were expected to attend and they would learn for the first time that Apolosi was not the Managing Director - one A.J. Mackay was. Apolosi met the problem head on. He called his own meeting for the evening of the same day to follow Mackay's, which went badly enough. Mackay warned of 'certain Fijians . . . who can only be called Germans' collecting money illegally in the name of the Viti Company. Then the Tui Nausori took two tabua to the directors, begging them to take no notice of Apolosi and his agitators: 'Europeans were the only people who could run their Company properly'. At night hundreds of Fijians and a few curious European observers or officials packed the hall to hear what Apolosi would have to say in reply.¹⁹

The man from Ra drove up outside in a gleaming black car and attired in a well-fitting tussore silk suit made for him by Peapes of Sydney. The Fijians in the audience received him as if he had been the Governor himself, but Apolosi was careful to begin on the self-deprecating note

demanded by both his sense of dramatic contrast and Fijian chiefly etiquette:

Chiefs of all Fiji and chiefs of Papalagi present here today. I am one who has not been long in this world, I am but a child [he was about 39] . . . it is not my prerogative to summon you chiefs together that you should leave your chiefly lands and put aside your chiefly rank to attend a meeting called in my name. Why then did you come? To see me? Is it not rather that you endorse this work of cleanliness to achieve our prosperity and increase in the present time . . .

Then after outlining the history of the Viti Company from the time his blindness was lifted to realize that only a company could give the itaukei a fair deal, he criticized the opposition he had received from Europeans, including the directors of the legal company. He asked the meeting why he had been excluded from the board: 'Someone tell me. Am I a thief? Do I oppose the Government?' He paused for a minute or two to search the faces of his audience. No one said a word. Then he went on to say how sad he was to hear that the afternoon meeting had gone badly for them. Could someone tell him why? One Felipe volunteered that they were angry to see Fijians had been excluded from the board. If it was really a Fijian company then surely Fijians should be in control. Apolosi asked the meeting to raise their hands if they agreed. There were no dissenters.²⁰

Much encouraged no doubt, Apolosi stepped up his fund raising for a variety of schemes called 'Life Insurance on Native Towns,' 'A Fijian Club,' 'Entrance to the Viti Company' and others more or less under his direction. European settlers were more alarmed by the political undertones of the movement. Viti Levu was alive with rumour. In one cable the District Commissioner of Ra reported that a young girl had been killed, cooked and partly eaten in Colo West. Settlers at Tavua, near the old seat of the Tuka cult at Drauniivi, demanded ammunition. George Barrow took time off from his little vendettas in Serua to warn that the European population was in real danger. He had heard heathen songs and dances gleefully representing the whites as swimming for their lives: 'Everything seems to point to an approaching conflict between black and white.'²¹

In May 1915 Apolosi was touring the Yasawa group collecting copra when a Fijian constable sent from Suva arrived at Yaqeta with a warrant for his arrest on a charge of embezzlement in Rewa. When Apolosi flatly refused to go, the constable returned to the mainland for reinforcement. On 17 May, the police arrived at dusk to find Apolosi standing on the beach between two fires with about thirty men seated in a circle around him. Apolosi said in English, 'Stand up, boys.' Tense and sweating, his protectors rose and stood shoulder to shoulder in silence. Light from the fire illumined their 3 foot pile of stout batons, and flickered up to faces blackened as if for war. Police Inspector Scott-Young read firmly from his warrant. Apolosi raised one arm and replied: 'I swear by Jesus Christ that I won't be taken alive. You may take my dead body. I don't care if you have 2,000 warrants. I will not go.' For an hour and a half Scott-Young stood there reasoning and threatening into the darkness. Then fearing bloodshed - his own - he retreated to his boat.²²

Two days later the Inspector-General of Constabulary, Colonel Islay McOwan, sailed from Lautoka with an armed party. At the mouth of the Ba River they intercepted a little fleet of cutters manned by Apolosi and his followers. The leader and twenty-four of his men were apprehended easily and charged with resisting a police officer in the execution of his duty. There were rumours, but as always no convicting evidence, that Apolosi and his men were on their way to Natutu in Ba to raise open rebellion and that if those people refused, then he was to go up into the mountains of Colo East. Apolosi was tried in Suva and sentenced to eighteen months with hard labour. His brother Kiniviliame and six others received shorter sentences, but there were many others to carry on his work under the name 'Fiji Produce Agency'. Their leader was one Joeli Cava of Vuce, Tokatoka, who reasserted the legitimate business aims of the Company and curried favour with the government. At the same time a meeting of the FPA at Sabeto in December 1915 drew up a protest against the government's attempts to control leasing arrangements and urged that Fijians themselves should cultivate their idle lands and market the produce. The Governor received a large delegation led by Joeli at Government House on Christmas Eve, 1915, discussed their objections and cautiously approved their projects. For the colonial authorities were still prepared to encourage Fijian commercial ambitions provided they did not 'interfere with the social organization necessary for the good life of the

majority of the people . . . the only life possible at this stage' for Fijians.²³

Four weeks after his release on 30 September 1916, Apolosi was back at Draubuta for a hero's welcome and to tell how much he had suffered for the Company cause. He inspected a guard of honour of 120 schoolchildren neatly dressed in the European clothes prescribed by the Company as the outward sign of progress towards a modern way of life. A surprise visitor was A.J. Mackay who announced that he had sold his 200 shares in the legal company to Apolosi. The board was now short of its required number and proportion of European blood; or rather the title director ceased to have any more meaning than the other titles in the original Company's pantheon. Books were kept spasmodically, and recorded only a fraction of the Company's transactions, most of which were handled by Apolosi personally. Thousands of pounds were unaccounted for. While some trading activities continued to be attributed to the registered company, an astute official warned 'the future historian of Fiji' not to be puzzled by the 'Company's' notoriety relative to

'the very evident unimportance of the registered company trading under that name . . . It is perhaps most intelligible if it is understood to denote the general body of native opinion dissatisfied with the present condition of native life and government, of which body of opinion the trading company is only a minor manifestation.'²⁴

In November the district of Lutu constructed a meeting house for the Company, 96 feet long, 36 feet wide. (The foundations are still visible.) Meanwhile Apolosi and Joeli were making a new bid for respectability. They called on Governor Sir Ernest Bickham Sweet Escott to leave a donation of £30 for Lady Escott's fund for wounded soldiers, and implored His Excellency not to believe evil stories that might be spread about them. They also called in at Davuilevu, Apolosi's alma mater, and talked with the Principal, the Reverend C.O. Lelean, about their plans for Fijians. Apolosi enquired after his young relative Lucy and begged Lelean not to allow her to be sent to the hospital for training as an obstetric nurse - the 'moral danger' of the place distressed him. Lucy should go to his school at Draubuta where the Company's own teacher, Tikiko Tuwai, would give her a modern education that included (it later eventuated) nightly classes for the girls in

'massage'. Apolosi impressed Lelean, as he had the Governor, with his sincerity and enthusiasm.²⁵

On 7 December 1916 the real Apolosi with his harem and a large entourage travelled in a flotilla of boats up the Wainibuka River to Lutu for the opening of the Bose Ko Viti, the Council of Fiji, as the meeting was not inaptly called. As he came ashore with Ro Tuisawau beside him the assembly of 5449 people from every part of Fiji gave him the muted roar of the high chiefly tama: duo! o! The high chiefly presentations of tabua, and the full kava ceremony (yaqona vakaturaga) were performed just as they would have been for the Supreme Chief or a member of the Royal Family.

Wherever the man from Ra moved, a body of ovisa with red armbands cleared the way; when he was inside a house or sleeping, they mounted guard on the doorways. His eight 'doves' took it in turns to roll cigarettes and put them in his mouth, or cool him with fans. At short meetings held daily for a week Apolosi and the Company officials were dressed in white shirts, white trousers, golf stockings and tennis shoes. Physically Apolosi (like Navosavakadua) was not impressive. He was neither tall nor, by Fijian standards, powerfully built. His dark full face was dominated by wide-set eyes under heavy eyebrows and a nose that flared out around cavernous nostrils. Fijians remember him for his resonant voice and the way his eyes focused hypnotically to seal his message. 'When he spoke', recalled one, 'it was like a bullet hitting your brain - whack!' Or in the words of a man of Matakawalevu village, Yasawas: 'Once Apolosi opened his mouth your mind was no longer your own.'²⁶

At Lutu he compensated for his lack of physical stature by sitting in an elaborate pulpit-like wooden throne ornamented with the flags of many nations, his bodyguard to either side, and at the lower level in front of him two men with typewriters to take the minutes of the meetings like the Hansard reporters in the Legislative Council. Could anyone doubt that a great chiefly council was now in progress?

Lutu, 7th December 1916, 12 noon. I now open our meeting house. The Government has ordered that as I am the promoter of the Company, I should be the Manager . . . if there be anyone here who is an enemy of the Company . . . I shall send to Suva for Constables to arrest him . . . God has

appointed me to be your comforter in bodily and spiritual things. Many chiefs of Fiji now dead and many still alive are not equal to me . . . Before I was born God predestined me to be your chief and to bring into being a new scheme by which Fiji would be independent in future and free from Government control . . .

In the words of a Fijian constable, 'It was exactly like a government meeting. There were Chief Constables, Magistrates, Doctors, just as if Apolosi was founding a government that might become something terrible . . . one question I wish to ask about Apolosi, if everybody salutes him as they do what is the use of the Government?'²⁷

A vast program was agreed upon. The Company would have ships and shipyards, stores and storehouses, a soap factory, its own school system. A Committee of Chiefs was formed under Ro Tuisawau, once Roko Tui Rewa, most of them harbouring some grievance against the colonial government. Company officers, managers, town chiefs and clerks were appointed for every province except Macuata and possibly Bua. Apolosi's own salary was fixed at £100 a month. The meeting closed on 20 December, in an atmosphere of celebration and hope.

The first signs that the euphoria was not to last came from some Colo East banana growers who received no payment for five shipments of bananas. Hitherto they had willingly accepted half the market price or less, for the cause, but their patience and loyalty did not extend indefinitely. They refused to send further shipments. Nevertheless they also refused to sell to Europeans and in the latter half of 1917 thousands of bananas rotted on the trees. Not a single man could be found to testify against the Company in court. Between January and April 1917 Apolosi received in his own name over £3000 in bananas and copra. After examining the chaotic books of the Company an accountant found there was no way of knowing the real extent of its operations or what happened to the proceeds. Since government was powerless to act under the existing Companies Ordinance until the shareholders petitioned for redress, it proposed to the Colonial Office a Native Company Ordinance giving the Registrar of Companies draconian powers of supervision over any company with a single Fijian member. The Secretary of State thought it difficult to believe such a measure could be contemplated seriously, and there the matter rested.²⁸

Intoxicated with his wealth and often with alcohol, Apolosi had begun to make extraordinary claims for his personal status. At Lutu the Colo West people had hailed him in song as king, and on one occasion he stopped a fight by raising himself on the shoulders of some men, saying: 'Please understand I will not have the least trouble in my presence for I alone rule [lewai] Fiji and if I say "let Fiji go to ruin", it will go to ruin.'²⁹ Similarly in the New Year of 1917, at the wedding of a Suva friend's daughter, he brandished two bottles of liquor he had waved under the noses of policemen en route, and then launched into a tirade against the chiefs present and absent:

I alone am the chief of Fiji: it is the will of God. These other chiefs only work for themselves; they don't spare a thought for you or your welfare. Just look at those two chiefs who went to the Great Council of Chiefs: they did nothing for our prosperity and I say they are scum (kaisi), all of them. You know who I am, Apolosi R. Nawai na kai Ra. In times past I was not known while the states of Bau and Rewa were renowned, but wait and you will see . . .

Summoned to a meeting with Ratu Sukuna - back from the war in France - and other officials of the Colonial Secretariat in March 1917, Apolosi solemnly promised that henceforth he would not encourage chiefly ceremonies in his honour and that he would abandon the use of official-sounding titles for Company agents.³⁰

Ratu Sukuna wrote an impassioned appeal the same month for much more drastic government intervention to bring Apolosi's 'sordid and unpatriotic' doings to a halt. Deportation was the only solution, he said:

Thinking Fijians look to the Government for help, vaguely wondering, with their autocratic views of government, why Apolosi and his followers have not been suppressed. His utterances and letters have been shown to be clearly against constituted authority and yet nothing is done . . . Apolosi is trafficking with racial feelings for position and gain . . . It is crime of the worst kind. It is an example of life unthinkable vile.³¹

But again government decided to wait for hard evidence of sedition.

About June 1917 Apolosi finally found a European businessman he could trust, an American named Walter Jago. Jago, it seems, tried hard to restrain Apolosi and establish the Viti Company on sound business lines. But it was too late. The settlers were after Apolosi's head for telling the Fijians that it was folly to lease lands to Europeans for 5s or 10s an acre and watch them reap £10 and £15 an acre in cane. If Indians were prepared to find £1 an acre or more, Apolosi was saying, why should Europeans or sugar companies get land for less? Two Europeans attended one of Apolosi's rallies at Nakorovou, Tavua, on 31 August 1917. Afterwards one of them made a statutory declaration that Apolosi had said, Koi au na meca ni matanitu, au na tamata kaukauwa: 'I am the enemy of the government, I am the strong man'. This, and a similar declaration by the other, provided the Governor and Executive Council with the sure evidence they needed. They issued another Confining Order (without trial) exiling Apolosi to Rotuma for seven years.³²

In an impassioned letter to the Executive Council after his arrest at Votua on 19 November 1917, Apolosi begged to be allowed to kiss the Bible in their presence and swear before God and King that he had not said anything of the sort: 'I humbly beg that you will hear me and permit those natives who were present on the 31st August 1917 at the meeting at Tavua to testify to what they heard at that meeting'. It is indeed unlikely that Apolosi would have been foolish enough to say the words attributed to him in the presence of hostile Europeans. The crude phraseology is inconsistent with his desire to give the company the trappings of legality, and the phrase 'strong man' is not typical of the dignities he claimed in his more extravagant moments. In short he was probably framed. The shoddiness of the confinement proceedings did not escape the Colonial Office: 'in the absence of judicial proceedings we really have to rely on the Governor's opinion'. The Governor was asked to review the case after a year.³³

Apolosi's own reaction is evident in his apologia: 'I cannot turn left, right, forward or backward, up or down, with the crowd of enemies that are about me.' He also offered a psychological analysis of himself and his past:

There are two great things that influence my body and my mind; firstly physical and mental foolishness; secondly, ignorance . . . Their

influence over me is due to my childish instability and bad upbringing . . . My mother and father were foolish and ignorant people. They had no wisdom or enlightenment, and therefore I inherited none from them whereby to be guided in my walk through life. Any knowledge or enlightenment that I have been able to gain has been through my own personal efforts . . . I have had no one to take an interest in me or hold me up or lead me out of the black darkness . . . it was as though I were covered with worms and everything repulsive. Many saw me, laughed at me, and mocked me. It was as though they sucked my blood and wrung the water out of my soul . . . ³⁴

The scriptural allusions to the Suffering Servant, a theme Apolosi instinctively invoked at each reverse, were both an abject admission of defeat and a clue to his forced retreat into messianism. For the rest of his days he tried to keep a hold over his followers - and their money - with feverish dreams of a New Era (Gauna Vou) in which he would be king of the world, and his leprous brother, Josevata, king of heaven or vicar of Jesus Christ.³⁵ After his release from Rotuma in 1924 he wandered restlessly through Viti Levu and the Yasawas, ever more extravagant in his claims, and perfecting his hypnotic rhetorical power. A brief resurgence of excitement in the Nadi area at the beginning of 1930, when Apolosi was predicting England's demise and a great depression, gave the authorities cause to exile him again for ten years. And finally when he resumed his 'work' while on probation in Suva in 1940, he was exiled again, transferred to New Zealand in case he fancied himself as a Quisling for the Japanese, and brought back to Yacata to die in 1946.

Apolosi was more corrupt entrepreneur than millenarian prophet. Yet in his own way he was a great patriot tapping the roots of Fijian pride by urging the people and chiefs to cut across the parochial limitations of their existing institutions. Even if he lacked a real set of alternatives, he could feel what was wrong in the Fijian Administration: there was no room for innovation and initiative from below. Economically Fijians were in a straightjacket. 'Very few people', he said, 'are in a bad plight because of their own decisions about themselves.' Apolosi died knowing that he had opened a deep vein of discontent; he had permanently injected the

rhetoric of Fijian politics with a demand for toro cake, that is, progress, improvement, and a better return on their labour and resources.

This text is taken from *The Fijian Colonial Experience: A study of the neotraditional order under British colonial rule prior to World War II*, by Timothy J. MacNaught, published 2016 by ANU eView, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.