

## Chapter 8

### Compromise for a multiracial society

Prior to the 1930s Fijians had not felt unduly threatened by the presence of Indians and had been content, by and large, to leave the details of their separate management to the colonial government and the sugar industry.

From 1887, when the first indentures were expiring, until about 1910, Fijian owners were tolerant and accommodating to individual Indians who preferred to fend for themselves rather than live in the official Indian segregated settlements (on blocks of Fijian land leased for the purpose by the government or on Crown land). Ignoring government regulations altogether, it seems that Indians were able to come to free-and-easy deals directly with the owners. 'Considerable irregularity prevails', noted W.L. Allardyce in 1889, 'as natives are seldom loath to give any one a piece of land to live on for a small pecuniary consideration on a verbal understanding between lessor and lessee.'<sup>1</sup> The regulations required that applications had to be approved by the tikina council and forwarded through the Roko to the Governor-in-Council. In 1909 it was reported from Labasa that Indians blithely disregarded the proper channels, bribed the owners directly and settled for all kinds of loose arrangements.<sup>2</sup> A mutual contempt for time-consuming legal processes was a constant feature of Fijian-Indian land transactions.

One can only speculate what might have emerged had Fijians and Indians been allowed to devise their own solutions to the land problem and more Indians been allowed to scatter throughout the group and attach themselves to the edges of village society. Children would have mixed freely and easily; schools, churches and even families might have taken them in, as happened to an unknown number of part-Fijian descendants of the 'Polynesian' labourers (mainly New Hebrideans and Solomon Islanders recruited from the 1860s until 1912). It is inconceivable that racial lines would have been so sharply drawn in later decades had not the government been dedicated to keeping the communities institutionally and physically separate.

From 1910 government decided to enforce the concentration of Indians in the sugar provinces of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu and close off the outer islands and

other areas of Fijian population by the simple device of refusing leases to new applicants lest they 'scatter themselves indiscriminately through the colony'.<sup>3</sup> Absolutely no thought was given to developing multiracial institutions of local government in the rural areas, nor to extending the jurisdiction of Fijian authorities over Indian settlements, nor to giving Indians a place in Fijian councils at any level. Where Fijians and Indians were neighbours in closely settled parts such as Navua and Ba, the hospitable inclinations of each community received no encouragement, despite the fluency some Indians acquired in Fijian and the willingness of many Fijians to learn some Hindustani pleasantries and even join in Indian festivals or sporting events. Individuals might share a bowl of 'grog' (yagona) on occasion, borrow tools, barter foodstuffs or chat at the markets, but there was almost no intermarriage, and Indian children were not admitted to Fijian schools. Each community, then, adjusted to a pattern of quite cordial but reserved relationships neither seeking nor being educated into truly common bonds of citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

Both communities were preoccupied less with each other than with the hard-line dominance of Europeans in every position of economic and political power at national level. Fijian chiefs were apprehensive during World War I that government seemed set on abolishing the Native Department as a separate identity. Three senior Rokos appealed to the Governor in 1915 to try and understand how much the old system meant to them. If destroyed, they said, 'it is plain to us that we Fijians will never be known again'.<sup>5</sup> For there would be no section of government exclusively dealing with Fijian affairs and safeguarding Fijian rights, no Talai whom the chiefs and humblest villagers could approach personally on matters great or trivial and through him gain the ear of the Supreme Chief.

These fears were realized in 1921 when the Native Secretariat was fully merged into the Colonial Secretary's office and the Talai's position given to an Under-Secretary. In place of the official to whose Suva quarters Fijians had always been able to go in the assurance of a courteous hearing and a lively understanding of their affairs, they were referred back to the provincial headquarters of the overworked and usually inexperienced District Commissioners. Having the agency of every government department in addition to their magisterial rounds of the whole population, the DCs had little time to

attend to Fijian affairs even if they had the inclination. Nor were they bound by any clearer Fijian policy than the ad hoc decisions of the Colonial Secretary.

These detrimental changes coincided with the first serious challenge to the European establishment from the Indians. After World War I the Indians were suffering acutely from sharp increases in the cost of imported staples with no redress from increased wages. They were often poorly nourished and riddled with parasitic infections such as hookworm. Labourers in the Suva-Nausori area, forced to the barest level of subsistence, were encouraged by the cancellation of all indentures on 1 January 1920 and the removal of the penal sanctions which had kept the majority of Indians disorganized and depressed since their first arrival in 1879. On 15 January 1920 Indian labourers of the Public Works Department began a strike that the panicky authorities regarded as having all the potential of a race war. And in truth it was the beginning of a long overdue struggle by Fiji's 60,000 Indians to gain an equal position of dignity and power in the colony. Australia cheerfully sent a warship, New Zealand sent sixty troops and Lewis guns, all Suva's Europeans were under arms and a few hundred Fijian auxiliaries patrolled the streets while the Indians had angry meetings, wrote letters and sent a deputation to Government House headed by a housewife. Some ugly confrontations took place but the strikers were armed only with sticks and stones when the police finally fired into a crowd on 12 February and killed a man and wounded several.<sup>6</sup> The strike collapsed, but the Indian blood on the road at Samabula left a stain of insecurity and fear for decades.

The following year saw a six months' strike in the main sugar areas of Viti Levu. When the trouble began on the Ba estates in February 1921, CSR was left without any household or plantation labour. Hundreds of Indians moved into Fijian towns and were sympathetically received, especially in Sigatoka where some Fijians employed by the Company also left work. The French missionary at Ba reported to his Bishop that the Indians canvassed Fijian villages for support and that many Fijians attended Indian political meetings: 'they understand the Indians pretty fairly'.<sup>7</sup> 'We white people recognized the peril', recalled the Reverend Stanley Jarvis a year later, and he and two of his Methodist colleagues, Wesley Amos and J.F. Long, stomped the countryside to persuade Fijians 'not to get

entangled with the Indians and their lawlessness'. The ministers, with the support of the Provincial Commissioner of Ba, H.C. Monckton, arranged for Fijians to evict their Indian guests and feed the Company livestock instead, or weed the railway lines. Hundreds of Fijians left their villages to live in the old 'coolie' lines for 2s 6d a day and food. Jarvis was known as 'the CSR Chaplain' for his work; when the strike was broken the Company celebrated with a dinner in his honour and a gift of £100. The Manager at Ba presented engraved walking sticks to Tui Ba, Tui Nadi and a chief from Nadroga for their 'loyal support in the time of stress'.<sup>8</sup>

An equally grateful government reassessed the importance of Fijian political support and reaffirmed its commitment to the paramountcy of Fijian interests. The Colonial Secretariat repented of the sorry state of the Fijian Administration. The chiefs now saw their opportunity to mend some fences and regain some of the influence they had recently lost. In a letter almost certainly drafted by Ratu Sukuna, three of the chiefs protested against the control of Fijian affairs by Europeans and the abolition of the Native Secretariat as a separate department.<sup>9</sup> Later they expanded their case at a informal meeting with Ratu Sukuna and two officials of the Colonial Secretariat. They deplored the complete lack of coordination of Fijian policy and practice and defended the concept of a native department as a representative institution, a powerful and hitherto successful advocate of the 'special conditions' for Fijian participation in the life of the colony - conditions which had protected their autonomy and dignity in the past and would alone guarantee their future. As an example of the low priority they felt Fijian affairs were allocated in the new order, Ratu Pope Seniloli of Bau complained of young DCs who demanded full customary honours (veiqaravi vakaturaga) that Fijians wanted to reserve for high chiefs and direct emissaries from Valelevu, the house of the Supreme Chief. And few DCs who received the honours understood their significance or responded with the courtesy and warmth expected of a chiefly recipient. For the people the ceremonies were becoming a degrading routine of cold and cynical gestures. It was the same with the feasts and mekes that the DCs, harbingers of the promoters of tourism, demanded that the people put on for their private visitors. Yet if a chief was visiting the province and paid his respects to the Provincial Commissioner in lieu of a Roko, he was not accorded like hospitality or facilities.<sup>10</sup>

So seriously did the chiefs fear a declining voice in colonial affairs that Ratu Rabici made a rare Fijian intervention in the Legislative Council to ask in December 1923 that a Talai be appointed and his salary paid from Fijian funds. In reply the Colonial Secretary admitted that Fijian affairs were beyond him. For a start he knew no Fijian. His principal assistant, D.R. Stewart, then spoke:

As the so-called supervisor of native affairs I more or less resemble the head of a turtle which, decapitated from the body, continues to look as if it is alive. It is dead, but its eyes continue to wink, and winking at things is not much use. The body of the turtle . . . is gradually decomposing'.<sup>11</sup>

The celebration for the Golden Jubilee of Cession at Levuka in 1924 gave the chiefs an opportunity to appeal yet again 'to see firmly established the principle of government in accordance with the customs of the land'.<sup>12</sup> They felt that the partnership established by Gordon and Thurston had been betrayed to some extent; the promises made at Cession were not being honoured. Their request for a Talai was renewed in 1925 and met the approval of the new Governor, Sir Eyre Hutson.<sup>13</sup> Islay McOwan was appointed Secretary for Native Affairs in 1926, but it was to be twenty years before the Rokos were relieved of close supervision by District Commissioners through whom all correspondence had to pass. In 1930 only four provinces - Cakaudrove, Ra, Macuata and Kadavu - enjoyed full control of Fijian affairs in Fijian hands, but the force of traditional chiefly leadership survived in the large number of Rokos or Native Assistants who were hereditary chiefs in the provinces to which they were appointed. It was demonstrated above in the career of Ratu Aseri Latianara (Chapter 4) how very useful these appointments remained in the pursuit of purely local political ambitions.

Similarly it was general policy to show a certain leniency towards chiefs who misappropriated provincial funds, as seen in the case of Ratu Pope Seniloli, Roko Tui of Tailevu from 1920. A great sportsman and fond of the good life, Ratu Pope entertained Fijian and European visitors to Bau on a scale commensurate with his dignity as Univalu of Bau but not with his official salary. In 1922

he began to draw occasionally on provincial funds, confident that his people would be understanding if he got into difficulties. As he told it:

Well months went by and one day a chap from the Government came in a launch - rather a blighter, I thought. We had a spot of whisky and a cigar, and he said: 'Ratu, the tide's turning and I must be pushing on. I've called, you know, to take back that tax money.' I said, 'I'm rather afraid, old boy, that I can't lay my hands on it now.' He seemed a bit miffed . . . <sup>14</sup>

An audit revealed a deficit of £764 16s 8d. Ratu Pope made no excuses other than his heavy commitments. On 7 February 1924 the Governor cabled the Secretary of State: 'In view of high chiefly position and for political reasons do not recommend criminal proceedings. Case can scarcely be viewed in light of European ethics . . .' With London's approval the popular chief was dismissed as Roko Tui, asked to resign his seat in the Legislative Council, but not charged. Even so the Bulis and chiefs of Tailevu, assembled in provincial council, received the Governor's decision coldly and declined to acclaim it in the customary way. Later they had to apologise (soro) to the Governor at Government House. The high chiefs, most of them connected with Bau by marriage, were unanimous that Ratu Pope should be reinstated, and they petitioned for his pardon on several occasions. Meanwhile Ratu Pope himself began repaying his debt and was finally reinstated on probation as Native Assistant in 1928. <sup>15</sup>

In the late 1920s, then, Fijians still had a half-hearted endorsement from the colonial government of their preference for separate institutions, nor were further attacks made on their land rights. Ratu Sukuna's Native Lands Commission made steady progress towards clarifying and registering customary titles under colonial law - the failure of im Thurn's reformation and Colonial Office instructions had left the government with no other choice. <sup>16</sup> Some finality in communal titles was the prerequisite for rural peace, the security of the Fijian estate, and smooth leasing arrangements for non-Fijians.

The Native Lands Commission had a formidable task, for customary tenure had always been flexible, which is not to say confused: chaos lay more in the outsider's mind unable to fathom the subtle principles and historic precedents

which Fijian community leaders would bring to bear on any decision about a piece of land, especially non-planting land where rights were vague or subsidiary. There was much room for political manoeuvres and ad hoc compromise; occasionally disputes simmered for years. The changing needs of households (as some groups increased and others decreased), the location of a new road, or a decision to invest in a commercial crop such as bananas, still more the enforced move of a village to a healthier site, were the kind of changes which led to the reallocation of land resources. In any case as David Wilkinson once put it, 'A Fijian has an innate objection to finality in land questions'.<sup>17</sup>

Ratu Sukuna's land hearings were formal but not awe-inspiring: at times he had to invoke legal sanctions to achieve due decorum. His objective was to achieve settlements that had the approval of most landowners and gave equitable shares to minority groups such as the refugees of former wars. Sessions were generally attended by a large, keenly aware audience from surrounding districts who could intervene if their own rights were threatened. When the final classifications and boundaries were promulgated, it was then up to the community itself as to how far or in what respects the official version of their society displaced the pre-existing social organization. To the confusion of some anthropologists and later generations of the people themselves, the one interacted with the other. Decisions on the use of land may have continued at one level to be made in the old way, but then if a dispute came to litigation, the official records were there to achieve a finality of decision not previously available.

From the few appeals made against his decisions, it is interesting to see how carefully the Oxford-trained chief applied the criteria of both equity and custom to oral evidence. He was prepared on occasion to ignore the arrangements put up by the people and impose his own. In one case he set aside the classificatory statements of both parties: 'for we conceive it a higher duty to make a reasonable settlement of your lands than to accept any division agreed to by you which is obviously inequitable'.<sup>18</sup> In another from the chiefly family of Cakaudrove, Ratu Sukuna rejected in summary fashion an attempt by the highest chief to enlarge his personal holding at the expense of the other members of the chiefly matagali. For both custom and equity required that the

chief who already owned 1500 acres should not receive any part of the 1000 acres shared by the other 180 members of his mataqali.<sup>19</sup> In the same province Ratu Sukuna took the unusual step of reopening the inquiry into the lands at Vuna when it came to his notice that the chiefly mataqali had wronged the subordinate mataqali - whose lands the chiefs had sold before Cession - by not mentioning to the Commissioners that the subordinate mataqali had been given compensatory planting rights on the chief's land. Ratu Sukuna registered these rights as encumbrances on the title. In a most revealing statement, he remarked that the Vuna people being

courteous and courtly in the presence of their chief would not consider it proper to press their claims . . . Though there is an estoppel I am of the opinion that the equity must from the administrative side be more seriously considered. Surely the Commission is not a court: so that in dealing with natives reason weighs more than legal technicalities.<sup>20</sup>

Ratu Sukuna's work was well done, in the Fijian view. There seems no reason to doubt his own reported statement that there would have been few or no appeals at all had he not always suggested appeal if there was any dissatisfaction.<sup>21</sup> Most appeals were more a record of disappointment than a serious attempt to reverse decisions. Ratu Sukuna believed that the critics of the NLC would be hard pressed to find any lasting sense of grievance against its decisions - which was just as well, because as one Governor noted, there was no one else qualified to review the evidence.<sup>22</sup>

Satisfaction may have been real at the time - if there were grievances they were kept 'in the family' and did not embroil the Administration. But there was no guarantee that the heirs to the parties who made certain deals at the time of the NLC - e.g. that the chiefly title would alternate between two lineages - would endorse the decisions of their fathers. Thus the original legal settlement could itself become a source of dispute in later years.

The inability of colonial law to sustain the whole range of subsidiary rights still recognized at custom (e.g. those acquired by new periods of long co-residence) meant

some loss in the ability of the community to meet future needs, especially those created by new arrivals. The migratory habits of Fijians hardly ceased at Cession. When the legal penalty for absenteeism was abolished in 1912, it was again easy for a Fijian to exploit a political and social relationship and move to another district or province. Wherever the NLC had held its hearings, there was no longer any way the outsider could acquire proprietary rights except to lease from the true owners or live on sufferance as a second-class vulagi, newcomer. (By independence one-third to one-half of Fijians lived away from their own lands.) Another loss of flexibility was that the official lists of descent groups overlooked the household as a real unit of society and did not allow for the ongoing process of de facto segmentation and amalgamation as kinship groups increased or decreased. Inequalities of distribution were bound to increase with time, for official lists of mataqali could not accommodate the inherent fluidity of Fijian kinship structure. Not that these kinds of academic observations are of much point unless a practical way can be suggested for achieving a periodic redistribution of land resources while maintaining the finality and clear procedures that would seem indispensable for preserving peace.

In later years the security of inalienable and meticulously recorded Fijian land rights, the envy of other Pacific peoples, was to become a tremendous problem for land-seeking Indians. It has often been said in Indian circles that Fijians seemed determined to deny an economic future on the land for Indians and others even when the owners themselves were unwilling or unable to bring their lands into full production. The same complaint was standard earlier in the century in local European political comment, but it was poorly based. After the land sales of 1905-08, Europeans already had freehold title to 393,000 acres and in 1911 some of the best of these lands - including prime river flats on the Dreketi and Sigatoka Rivers - were lying idle. Add to this 320,000 acres of Fijian land held by the government for leasing and it is hard to credit the propaganda of the Planters Association that the Fijian land monopoly was the main reason the colony was slow to progress.<sup>23</sup> Yet the elected members of the Legislative Council were constantly urging, in the words of one, that 'the native owners should not be allowed to defeat the best interests of the community and themselves owing to mental inability . . . tradition, superstition or sentiment'.<sup>24</sup>

Many government officers were in quiet agreement. After five years in Lau a magistrate wrote in 1914 that it was 'a most retarding influence on its development that most of the coconut land is tied up in the hands of idle natives, who will not lease it and will not use it themselves'. He estimated that where the Fijians were earning about £40,000 a year from their nuts, Europeans on the same lands would make £400,000, 'and one of the biggest assets of the Colony would not be lost'.<sup>25</sup> The notion that Fijian land was an asset of the colony, of the whole multiracial community, an asset wasted in the hands of the idle natives, underlay most of the non-Fijian political rhetoric or administrative comment on Fijian lands in the colonial period. The implicit invocation of the higher law that the earth belongs to all was not without effect, it will be seen, on the Fijians themselves.

Im Thurn's successor, Sir F. Henry May, was allowed to resume efforts to persuade the people that they should surrender voluntarily the control of surplus lands on equitable terms. 'No wise landlord', May lectured the Council of Chiefs in 1911, 'lets good agricultural land lie idle and unproductive', especially if there were tenants offering 'good hard gold' as rent. Six provinces (Tailevu, Cakaudrove, Ra, Rewa, Colo North and Colo East) admitted to having more lands they could lease. The chiefs resolved to hand over to the government the control of unused lands and lands under lease when such leases expired - the government to fix the terms of the leases as it saw fit. 'It is our wish that all future applications . . . be made direct to the Government. We fully trust the Government will safeguard our interests in dealing with our lands.' It was also agreed that the government deduct 5 per cent of rents by way of agency fees - increased to 10 per cent in 1912.<sup>26</sup>

It was soon revealed that the Fijian interpretation of 'waste and unused' and that of the government were widely divergent. Land was used in Fijian eyes if it yielded the occasional wild yam for the pot or timber for a house. Practically no good land was handed over in the desirable areas. The government decreed that from 1 January 1916 no further leasing of Fijian land would be allowed unless it had first been handed over to government control. Fijians were thus asked to forgo valuable rights without compensation, and not surprisingly there was some opposition from those who saw what was happening. Apolosi's friend Ro Tuisawau of Rewa and others protested that the disposal of their lands was their 'prerogative and

that of our descendants until the end of the world'.<sup>27</sup> Then in 1916 the government legislated a new deal for the Indian and other tenants of Fijian lands. If the owners refused to hand over their leases to the government, the lessee desiring an extension could demand compensation to the value of his permanent and unexhausted improvements to the land. The government hoped to prevent Fijians ejecting a lessee unfairly - often at the instance of another Indian coveting the lease and offering a bigger bribe. All transactions in Fijian land were declared invalid unless approved in writing by the Governor-in-Council.<sup>28</sup>

Opposition to government control was strongest in Ba where many villages were short of land for their own needs. A letter signed by 242 men of the Bulu and Nailaga districts put their objection none too politely: 'If we were to approve, what would happen to us in the future? Where would we live? Or are our wives and children to live in caves with the goats?'<sup>29</sup> Lease applications had previously been regarded by Fijians as heaven-sent opportunities for easy spoil. Unfortunately, in the absence of complete surveys it was often still necessary under the new system for an applicant to describe the boundaries with the help of the owners; there was no way government could prevent Indians from offering 'inducements' to Fijian owners to surrender their land in the first place. The owners could adjust the amount to compensate for the anticipated rent (decided by the government). This 'undoubted burlesque' of the regulations was not calculated to appeal to the Indian applicants the government was trying to help.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand it would be difficult to prove that the surrender of control to the government or the availability of land on easy terms led to the energetic development of the colony. There was some consternation at the Council of Chiefs in 1920 as to what the government really desired in regard to unused lands. Ratu Pope Seniloli even had a motion passed that the government should 'bring from England men to occupy our lands and to develop them and so to assist in the prosperity of the natives'.<sup>31</sup> If Fiji offered such potential, why had the settlers not come? And the government had disappointed Fijians in its agency role. In the early 1920s rents were tremendously in arrears. In 1923 outstanding rents in Nadi were £3691 of the total rent roll of £5442. In Suva arrears were about 65 per cent. Rents in Tailevu were in some cases unpaid for seven or eight years. Landowners

were kept waiting for days at the offices of the Provincial Commissioners only to come away with nothing.<sup>32</sup>

If Fijians had reason to be disillusioned, the European colonists were still far from satisfied. In a memorandum to the Secretary of State in 1924, Sir Maynard Hedstrom acknowledged the difficulty of securing markets for crops - Australia had closed its door to Fijian bananas, for instance - but there were encouraging prospects for dairying, cotton and pineapple, he argued, which made it desirable that the Colonial Office reconsider its policy and allow native lands to be made more easily available for settlement. The Fijians were 'a primitive and underdeveloped people' who should not be allowed 'through caprice or through lack of knowledge, to hinder and obstruct the natural development of the Colony'.<sup>33</sup>

In the absence of Sir Cecil Rodwell, who agreed with Hedstrom, the Acting Governor, T.E. Fell, refuted the charge of Fijian obstructionism, citing the example of the Ra people who had surrendered 76,000 acres during the previous six years - the Tova Estate - while the Provincial Councils of Macuata, Cakaudrove and Bua in 1923 had reiterated their willingness to hand over surplus lands. Finally Fell predicted that a time would come when Fijians themselves would be able to develop their lands commercially: 'future generations may have surprises in store'.<sup>34</sup>

About 1930, when a large number of Indian sugar leases were up for renewal, some Fijians in those provinces expressed interest in working the land themselves. Landowners began to query the wisdom of surrendering, say, 10 acres of mataqali land for £5 a year and watching a single tenant make £150 from his lease. Although few Fijians were in a position to redeem their lands and compensate the tenants, the Indians were made uneasy by extremist propaganda and the atmosphere of resentment. Representatives of Indian planters were able to cite instances where some of their fellows had been made homeless by eviction. They pressed for longer leases of up to ninety-nine years arguing that they had severed their connection from India in every way and had made Fiji their permanent home.<sup>35</sup>

In 1930 the Council of Chiefs approved the principle of longer leases to Indians if Fijian needs were safeguarded, and in 1933 new leasing regulations increased

the usual lease period from twenty-one to thirty years with provision for ninety-nine years in special cases - a loophole for Europeans with the right connections. The Provincial Commissioners had already been instructed to ensure that adequate planting lands were available to a village by demarcating non-leasable reserves. In memoranda to the government, CSR (sole sugar miller after 1926) said it was deeply concerned by the reluctance of Fijians to renew leases and the insecurity of its 4000 Indian sub-tenants on some 50,000 acres of Fijian land. The success of the Company's small-farm scheme, which had transformed the sugar industry since the end of indenture in 1920 and provided thousands of Indian families with a modest income, could be jeopardized by any suspension of Fijian goodwill. Half the industry was at stake. Although the Council of Chiefs was prevailed upon to approve legislation compelling Fijians reoccupying land to keep it under efficient cultivation or have it leased again, CSR argued that the measure was not sufficient: continuity of cultivation was still broken. In their opinion no successful Indian cane farmer should be refused renewal. The company despaired of ever being able to rely on Fijians for a regular cane supply as it had in Thurston's day.<sup>36</sup>

Fijian refusals to renew leases were most frequent in the Nausori area where 90 per cent of the mill's requirements were supplied by some 2000 small growers. Of thirty-four renewal applications in 1932, sixteen were refused, the Fijians usually stating that they wanted to plant the land themselves. In most cases the Fijians re-employed Indians to do all their work, and signed promissory notes to be honoured by the sale of the crops.<sup>37</sup>

On the western side there was much less trouble with the renewal of leases - 'no trouble at all' in Lautoka during 1935, reported the District Commissioner: 'Only one renewal was refused . . . and the Indian lessee had two other leases.'<sup>38</sup> In 1936 only four renewals were refused and again in 1938 the Fijians were adjudged most reasonable. The situation varied from year to year, from province to province, and prior to 1937 accurate statistics of Fijian refusals to lease were not kept. The problem was certainly not acute.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless CSR continued to press for absolute security for the tenants of Fijian lands against the threat of the owners resuming control and reducing or abandoning cane production. Reading the signs of the times, Ratu

Sukuna took it on himself to persuade the 1936 Council of Chiefs to make further concessions. In a speech lasting over an hour the emergent statesman reviewed the history of Fijian lands since Cession and paid tribute to the disinterestedness of the British government. Fijians were now faced with a new situation, he said, where they had to accept that they owed a moral obligation to the state to use their land. They all knew the parable of the talents. Did they also know that in other countries governments used death duties and taxes to redistribute the land more equitably? Better for the chiefs to propose their own scheme for the productive use of land than have forced on them something less congenial. The current system of leasing was wasteful - only the eyes of the land were taken - and corrupt:

We can, surely, come to no other decision but to abolish a system that is capable of producing so much evil . . . gradually destroying our sense of purity and honesty of dealing and respect for others, qualities that are cherished ornaments of our civilization. I maintain that native lands can only be leased fairly if the Government has control . . .<sup>40</sup>

Only two men spoke against the motion, the Tui Cakau and his fellow member from Cakaudrove.

The real test of the resolution came with its referral to the nineteen provincial councils. Ratu Sukuna's speech was printed and distributed widely, and broadcast over the new weekly Fijian session on the radio. The chief addressed one or two councils personally. The final results were an extraordinary achievement for a viewpoint that had never before been put by a Fijian to his own people: twelve councils agreed unanimously and four by a large majority that after the determination of the amount of reserve land needed for their 'proper development', the surplus, including existing leases, should be handed over to the government for leasing to others. Only Cakaudrove was still opposed, in deference to their chief, and two councils were undecided.<sup>41</sup>

On the eve of his departure from Fiji in July 1938, Governor Sir Arthur Richards proposed a Native Lands Trust Ordinance to give effect to Ratu Sukuna's motion and empower the government to deal with all the Fijian lands in the colony without reference to the owners - the reserve

lands having been first set aside for exclusive Fijian use. The Council of Chiefs approved Richards' proposals in 1938 and the final bill for the establishment of the Native Lands Trust Board was approved by the Legislative Council on 22 February 1940. The Indian members acknowledged that Fijian owners had 'undoubtedly adopted a broad and generous attitude to their lessees', but pressed for leases to be as long as possible and even perpetual. Ratu Sukuna hailed the legislation as a 'monument of trust in British rule, of confidence in its honesty, and of hopes . . . that Europeans, Indians and Fijians will settle down to labour, sacrificing if need be community interests for the benefit of the whole'.<sup>42</sup>

Fijian compromises for a multiracial society did not extend so magnanimously to the political arena. The census of 1936 found the 98,000 Fijians to be just under half the total population, with the 85,000 Indians comprising 43 per cent. Their crude death rate (10.27 per thousand for the years 1928-37) was under half that of the Fijians (22.97), so that the latter faced the demographic certainty that within a decade they would no longer be the largest group. The success of the Indians in gaining three elected members in the Legislative Council after 1929, the comparative prosperity of CSR tenant farmers, the growth of education for Indian children, and the entry of over a thousand Indians into commerce left no doubt that they would in time become prosperous and influential.

The Fijian chiefs closed ranks finally with local Europeans in the constitutional debates of the 1930s to head off Indian demands for common electoral rolls. The Indian case was powerfully argued on 'the recognition of the principle of common and equal rights' and with an idealistic vision of a future democracy in which Fijians and Indians would come into their own. The prominent lawyer S.B. Patel and other Indian leaders were at pains to acknowledge that historic Fijian interests were still paramount, but claimed that common franchise would diminish racial friction and encourage all to pull together 'for the good and welfare of Fiji as a whole'.<sup>43</sup> In defence of this principle, the Indian members had boycotted the Legislative Council from 1929 to 1932.

Fijian reaction was distinctly hostile. The Council of Chiefs in 1933 recorded its 'strong and unanimous opinion' that the 'Indian immigrant population should neither directly nor indirectly have any part in the

control or direction of matters affecting the interests of the Fijian race'.<sup>44</sup> In 1935 the three Fijian members of the Legislative Council led by Ratu Sukuna published a long explanation that was hailed by church and business leaders as a persuasive case why Fiji should not only reject a common franchise but the franchise itself. 'A system that rests on the counting of heads', wrote the chiefs, or the 'notion that the people are the best judges of matters of vital importance to the welfare of a state' would be 'utterly incomprehensible' to a people who understood government as 'commands issued in the general interest by a hierarchy composed of chiefs, priests and elders'. In 1935 that was a remarkably archaic assessment of Fijian capabilities, but it was music to government ears when coupled with an evocative appeal to the Deed of Cession and the

thoughts running in the minds of the chiefs, the feeling that they were handing over their country as a whole and their domains, each and severally, as a fief of the Crown; that they would in future be ruled autocratically but withal sympathetically; that from henceforth they were the vassals of the Great White Queen . . .

After years of Crown colony government, there is nothing natives desire better than to be governed by the King's Representative with the help and advice of his senior officers and such European members of the Legislative Council as are, as far as possible, above the influences of local interests and prejudice.

The Chiefs noted that the European electorate would soon be 'white only in name, enlightened only in memory' due to the increase and low educational level of part-Europeans, and that Europeans would have no case at all on democratic grounds for denying Indians a similar opportunity to ensure 'the predominance of ignorance and prejudice'. Democracy itself, they concluded, should therefore give way to a racially balanced system of nominating enlightened representatives for each community.<sup>45</sup>

These arguments agreeably played to the fears of the European elite that they would lose their own position to part-Europeans, and that the Indians would triumph over all by sheer weight of numbers. Government response was rapid. In 1936 the municipal franchise was abolished in Suva and

Levuka to eliminate any possibility of Indian control. Governor Sir Murchison Fletcher favoured a return to a Legislative Council comprising a majority of official members with nominated representatives of each community. The Colonial Office decreed finally that the Legislative Council would comprise sixteen official members, five Fijian members nominated from a panel of ten chosen by the Council of Chiefs, and an equal number of European and Indian members. Three of the five European and three of the five Indian members were still to be elected on communal rolls - an arrangement that lasted to 1963.

The false symmetry of these measures signalled that racial division was hardening into an accepted part of national life. Careful balancing of communal interests encouraged each community to cling to its own identity, to think instinctively in racial terms, to worry incessantly about political solidarity, and perhaps to miss the main point that Fiji's divided people would never to be able to loosen the grip of the Australian or New Zealand corporations and a few local Europeans over exports, imports and the internal market system.

Politically these changes made no compromise, then, over the paramountcy of Fijian interests to match the concessions made over land. The Fijians, it seemed, still had the separate space they needed to concentrate on their own development while the local Europeans and British officials held the fort. Nevertheless the new-found solidarity of the Europeans and Fijians in national politics and the frank admission of Fijian dependence on the trusteeship of the Crown obscured the deeper problem that neither the government nor the Fijians had really come to terms with the dilemmas of modernization and economic development.

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