

Chapter 10

Epilogue: rendezvous with the modern world

'It may be that to deny the omnipotence of the great octopus of the modern world bespeaks an old-world outlook', wrote Ratu Sukuna in 1934, 'but it is after all, of a semi-feudal, semi-self-sufficing, society that we are, in the main, treating.'¹ Six years later the war effort, the tentacles of the great octopus, drew thousands of Fijian men out of their narrow village world in response to Ratu Sukuna's own appeals. Gladly accepting a commission as Recruiting Officer with the rank of major in the minuscule Fiji Defence Force, Ratu Sukuna welcomed the opportunity to show the world and more especially the local Europeans and British authorities his people's physical prowess, intelligence, loyalty and capacity for sustained devotion to a communal cause. He seems to have calculated that a tremendous war effort by the Fijians would achieve several of the goals he had espoused for twenty years: an expanded role for traditional leadership, a renewed appreciation of the Fijian capacity for community and cooperation, and a secure compact with local Europeans to safeguard at the national level vital Fijian interests such as land. In none of these was he to be disappointed.

More immediately the future of the British Empire itself seemed less certain as the German armies crushed Holland and Belgium in May 1940 and France's defences began to crumble. In July almost every eligible local European was called up for training in the 1st Territorial Battalion, and a second was raised at Ba. Ratu Sukuna easily obtained fine Fijian recruits for a Regular Rifle Company: 'young men could not bear the shame of not participating in such a community effort . . . It was a source of honour and pride to the Buli and his people if they were well represented and none of their soldiers were rejected . . .'²

New Zealand, assuming the defence burden of the South Pacific colonies, built up its Second Expeditionary Force in Fiji to 4000 men by the Pearl Harbour attack of 7 December 1941. The local forces were integrated into the New Zealand command for operations and training. Following the invasion of Rabaul and decimation of the Australian defenders in January 1942, then the fateful surrender of Singapore the following month, 'it was all too easy to

imagine a Japanese tide sweeping irresistibly over the whole Pacific Ocean'.³ Japanese troops landed on the New Guinea mainland in March and occupied Tulagi in the south Solomons in May, signalling a determined thrust south towards Australia, but not impossibly a side sweep through New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa as well.

To meet this danger New Zealand increased its Fiji garrison to 10,000 men, and Ratu Sukuna raised a second battalion of Fijians at Lautoka. New Zealand officers seconded to Fijian units developed a high regard for the enthusiasm and soldierly qualities of the Fijian recruits. In May they formed three commando units to develop further the skills for which Fijians were to become celebrated. Ambush, silent movement, acute observation and instant response to attack at close quarters became the forte of the Fijian jungle fighter. Field training developed close personal bonds between New Zealanders and Fijians, transforming the old colonialist code of automatic deference to one of mutual respect and affection. For the first time in decades ordinary Fijians could see and judge a white man by the true measure of his integrity, individual personality and professional competence. Both were training for the field of fire where European lives would depend as much on Fijian skill and intelligence as the converse. Knowing there could be no racists (any more than atheists) in foxholes, the New Zealanders seem to have divested themselves of petty obsessions with white prestige and shared their expertise willingly with Fijian officers and NCOs. There were no invidious distinctions to hinder the training of a totally professional fighting force.⁴

Unfortunately such distinctions could still be made at the expense of the Indians when most accepted their leaders' advice not to enlist at less than European scales of pay and thus further institutionalize economic inequality. Their 'indifference' - so it was construed - to Britain's plight, the service of fewer than three hundred in the military, the politically untimely continuation of their pre-war struggle against CSR for better cane prices, culminating in the refusal of CSR tenants to harvest the 1943 crop, threw into sharper relief the quality of the Fijian-European effort. Worst of all it left the whole Indian community vulnerable to insinuations of disloyalty and even 'subversion', serious charges that could be delivered with those unpleasant aspersions on manhood other wartime societies reserved for pacifists.⁵ (Not least in the legacy of these events was a

tacit understanding that the army would be virtually a Fijian preserve.)

The 7500 men of the Fiji Defence Force came under American operational control when the 37th Division of the U.S. Army relieved the New Zealanders in June 1942. The following month a new Governor, Major-General Sir Philip Mitchell, arrived to mobilize the entire colony. Having come 'to wage war', he stirred the Council of Chiefs in September with a Churchillian appeal for another thousand men:

The business of brave men in time of danger is to fight, to suffer, to die if need be: but above all else to seek out the enemy and fight him . . . and if the enemy should come to our land we are going to fight him on our beaches and in the roads and fields and in the woods and hills, until we utterly destroy him and drive him into the sea.⁶

Perhaps, he concluded, Fiji's destiny was to be enrolled in the stars with the other glorious islands of Malta and Britain: Fiji had to be ready. The chiefs unanimously urged that Fijian soldiers be sent overseas into action without delay.

At the end of 1942 reluctant American consent was given for thirty Fijian commandos to serve as scouts in the Solomons. They so distinguished themselves that General Patch, the area commander, successfully appealed for as many as he could get. The 1st Commandos and the whole 1st Battalion were emotionally farewelled in a march through Suva on 13 April 1943.⁷

The commandos saw action on New Georgia and Vella Lavella, and did much to enhance the growing reputation of Fijian troops. After useful work on Florida and Kolombangara, the 1st Battalion was moved in November to the front on Bougainville's east coast. Their aggressive patrols brought on a determined Japanese attempt to seek out and destroy them. In February 1944 they were saved from encirclement only by the local knowledge of a resident Fijian missionary, Usaia Sotutu, who led the battalion in epic retreat over the Emperor mountain range to a west coast beachhead. The battalion saw seven months of continuous action on Bougainville for the loss of only eighteen men and sixty-four wounded before they were

retired in July 1944.

Meanwhile the 3rd Battalion was in action from March to August 1944 bringing the total number of Fijians to fight with the Allies to 2071 and the death toll to forty-two. Sadness for these losses was quite eclipsed by popular exultation over the award of a posthumous Victoria Cross to Corporal Sefanaia Sukainaivalu. Twenty-nine other British decorations marked official recognition of Fijian valour and skill.

The war was such a disruption of village life that many feared the dislocation would be permanent. Neglected womenfolk were unwilling or unable to repair their houses, and some tikina had less than a score of men available for the program of work. In April 1944, a year past the peak of the war effort, there were still 9503 Fijians working for wages, or 36.5 per cent of able bodied males between 16 and eighty. Nearly 7000 men were in uniform or directly employed by the military.⁸ Clearly, firm plans had to be made for post-war reconstruction, and especially in relation to the place of the village and the old problem of those who wanted to strike out on their own.

Ratu Sukuna was particularly sensitive about the encouragement the Department of Agriculture had given to its protégés to supply food for the forces as individual contractors. They had been very successful, and H.W. Jack, still Director of Agriculture, was unrepentantly drawing some future policy implications of his own: 'I maintain very strongly', he wrote in 1943, 'that those who wish to farm individually should be encouraged to do so and to exercise this freedom of choice without compulsion as British subjects.' Ratu Sukuna countered that agricultural officers and their Fijian assistants were operating lucrative closed markets for the exclusive benefit of a few. Government should look to the long-term results of undermining the villages, for which the earlier experiments (see Chapter 9) had provided some dramatic evidence.

Mogodro and Qaliyalatina had become bywords for desolation and depression. Reay's glowing accounts of the benefits of the individualistic peasant existence had no counterpart in the actual experience of the people for whom there was more to life than digging on their own land or carrying produce to Ba. The young men found the isolation unbearable and fled to the coast to join the army or get a job; the women stayed for long periods in the nearest

villages, while the old and sick often fended largely for themselves. Ministers could get no one to church; the schools were empty of children living too far away; village meetings and customary observances all suffered. As the chiefs had predicted at their first Council in 1875, life outside a strong communal organization became a struggle for subsistence devoid of stimulation; the deep valleys no longer echoed to laughter or song. (In the words of one informant the people 'just went to sleep' until at the end of the war most of them were regrouped at Navala on the Ba River. Old men interviewed in Colo North had nothing good to remember about Reay's scheme, although forty years later there were survivors still scattered in the bush.)

Governor Mitchell himself rode through this district (from Ba to Nadarivatu) and confirmed that it was indeed a 'melancholy wilderness'. He wrote to the Colonial Secretary:

I hope we have heard the last of this lunacy and that it is generally recognized that the Fijian community is the basis of Fijian society and that for Government to intervene to destroy it is stupid, if not indeed wicked . . . Even if the exempted man succeeded in the sense that his sponsors understand success, that is to say even if he earned more money for himself and less obligation to his fellows, nothing would be proved which has not already been proved by the melancholy condition to which the same philosophy [of individualism] has brought Europe.⁹

Ratu Sukuna had made a powerful convert. Having himself visited the much-vaunted individualists in Colo North in 1941, the chief had condemned the experiment as 'foreign in conception, novel in thought, and socially disruptive in form':

The reality of the position is that some natives do well as individual growers where a market is assured; others succeed for a time and then, finding regular work irksome, either return to their villages or become rolling stones; some again stay on to escape social obligations, producing barely enough for their own requirements while living in hovels. In sickness and in old age all return for aid to the village

community.¹⁰

Though since regarded by scholars as the arch-conservative spokesman for outmoded orthodoxy in Fijian affairs, Ratu Sukuna developed a telling critique of the vague liberal ideology underpinning the colonialist preference for individualism. He insisted that his British colleagues were unconsciously affected by the discredited Enlightenment hypothesis of a blissful state of nature, implicit in their enthusiasm for the virtues of an isolated life in the bush. The historical reality in Fiji, as he saw it, was that moderately autocratic personal authority, religious and kinship ties had been the principles of a sophisticated social order redeeming the people from utter chaos and primitive subsistence. The premise that civilization could now flourish in the bush in isolation and that the best settlers were individualists was a utopian product of the myopic liberal mind and ignored the practical wisdom of centuries. Nor could he countenance the forced dependence of individual growers on the cruel, externally determined cycle of local and international gluts and shortages. For market fluctuations always rebounded hardest on primary producers, a world-wide phenomenon beyond dispute. It was much worse when they were, as in the interior, totally without organizations of their own.

Ratu Sukuna was also keenly aware that centuries of western civilization and modern industrialization had produced the characteristic individualism and capitalist milieu of European culture:

Without this background and an assured market the villager cannot by ukase be changed overnight into an individualist, nor can he in isolation find new vigour and moral purification . . . Freedom the new individualist does not understand. His word for it is tu galala, which means freedom not in the sense of laissez-faire, but in the sense of freedom without an object.¹¹

He defended the village as still 'the most natural, the most convenient, and the cheapest unit of administration and for bestowing most effectively those inestimable gifts civilization can bring to a native race - medical attention, education in the broadest sense of the word, and religious teaching'.¹²

Even before inspecting the effects of village dissolution, Governor Mitchell had determined to move quickly to reorganize the Fijian Administration in accordance with Ratu Sukuna's views. He appointed the chief himself as the new Talai, now restyled Secretary for Fijian Affairs with an ex officio seat on the Executive Council. The Fijian Affairs Ordinance of 1944 reconstituted the old Native Regulations Board as a much more powerful Fijian Affairs Board, chaired by the Talai, and comprising only the Fijian members of the Legislative Council and a Legal Adviser. The objective was to tie more closely together the Executive Council, the Great Council of Chiefs and the members nominated by the latter for the Legislative Council. In other words a small interlocking directorate of Fijians close to the government was to have unambiguous control over the whole Fijian Administration. The Fijian Affairs Board assumed control over the local government finances and all administrative positions of consequence, as well as any other, undefined, special Fijian interests. Mitchell noted that the significance of these changes was that Fijians would be ruled by 'Officers and organizations truly native in composition and outlook and able . . . to carry the confidence of the native people . . .'¹³ At provincial level Rokos and magistrates were freed of direct European supervision, despite parallel appointments of District Officers, often European, to attend to the business of other government departments and the affairs of the whole population. For those with memories such as Ratu Sukuna had of his boyhood years in the 1890s, Fijian colonial history had come full circle.

In the rapidly approaching era of decolonization it was a quite novel defiance of liberal concepts of progress and individualism to reissue the Native Regulations with the privileges of chiefs nominally intact and stringent conditions governing the release of individuals from communal programs of work. For post-war Fijian policy, as guided until 1958 by Ratu Sukuna, did not construe progress as the right to live a life free from obligations, nor as the sabotage, in the name of democracy, of the capacity of village leaders to maintain the social security of all.¹⁴

On the other hand Fijian leaders shared the aspirations of their people for better houses, education and medical services. They shared too a general anxiety about the faster population increase of the Indians and the outcome of their efforts to win an equal place in the colony's affairs. Fear of Indian domination was

deliberately stirred by European elected members of the legislature seeking to exploit the lack of Indian support for the war effort or to carry over the euphoria of wartime European-Fijian solidarity into a permanent post-war political alliance. Local born Europeans now unctuously identified themselves with the British authorities as 'trustees' of the Deed of Cession and took up the cry 'Fiji for the Fijians': 'those of us who have the interests of the Fijians as heart know the writing is on the wall, and it spells disaster for them', warned A.A. Ragg in 1946.¹⁵

European propaganda about 'the Indian menace' strengthened Ratu Sukuna's appeals for a greater Fijian effort to bring their lands into full production. He pinned his faith on the capacity of the renovated Fijian Administration to inspire communal efforts at village level. A major innovation, which illustrates his approach, was to bring all Fijian copra production under centralized control, eliminating most of the European and Chinese middlemen. A compulsory saving scheme in the form of a cess of £10 sterling on every ton of copra funded a Fijian Development Fund which was used mainly to finance more permanent housing. The goal, as always, was to achieve a state of collective financial and social security without breaking up the villages. He was perhaps unreasonably confident that Fijians would work as enthusiastically for their collective well-being as they would for themselves. In parliament he defended the element of compulsion as

the normal kind of compulsion which is exercised daily in native society and which is its lifeblood. Without it, Sir, village life at this stage would come to a stand- still . . . From time immemorial, communal work of a compulsory nature has been regarded as normal; so also the levy for a common purpose. It naturally follows that these services are enforceable in the Native Regulations . . .¹⁶

Ratu Sukuna's generally progressive goals were thoroughly in tune with village aspirations and needs, but the renovated machinery of administration was not. The corporate strength of the old tikina based on the local chiefly domain, the vanua, still the most effective unit of cooperation, was often sacrificed in the amalgamation of two or three tikina into one (reducing the total number from 184 to 76). For Ratu Sukuna was as impatient as any English official with the parochialism of district politics

and inveighed against it often. Similarly, in an effort that was a complete failure, he urged smaller villages to combine into more viable and attractive communities capable of burning a few 'bright lights' of their own.¹⁷ Fijians clung tenaciously to smaller groupings and their own chiefs. It was a singular Buli indeed who could get people not his own to work gladly under him in the old way as if he were their own chief. And it was a rare village which felt properly represented by an outsider-Buli speaking for its needs on the provincial council. Ratu Sukuna had over-estimated the dynamics of traditional organization in trying to stretch it in new directions and control it bureaucratically. The result, in the opinion of many keen observers, was a fundamentally flawed administrative machinery marked by rigid authoritarianism and village apathy, leading in some areas to a near paralysis of effective local leadership.¹⁸

There were new problems, too, at provincial level with a siphoning of power from the Rokos and District Officers to powerful District Commissioners responsible for four or five provinces, so that, for instance, there was little the Roko Tui of Nadroga and Navosa could do without reference to the District Commissioner Western at Lautoka.¹⁹ He in turn answered closely to Suva, and supervised an ever-growing corps of economic development and agricultural officers whose influence reached down to village level, not always in coordination with the provincial office. The Roko's leadership was thus compromised or bypassed, while the annual provincial councils, usually dominated by the new officials, were inclined to rubber-stamp their wishes without real debate.

A critical weakness of official reliance on communal labour was that local authorities could, and often did, withdraw their labour force from agriculture to domestic or social tasks, principally house repairs. The Fijian Development Fund was never able to make housing improvements on a scale that would diminish the burden of communal work. Secondly, the government was not willing or able to control personal movement, so that by 1956 a quarter of the Fijian population had chosen wage employment or life outside the village. The 'burden of obligations' fell ever harder on those that remained. Finally, inherent in any form of communal development was the need for inspired personal leadership close to the people. Ratu Sukuna's bureaucratic, top-heavy and highly ceremonious administrative machine was simply inadequate to engage with

the risks of commercial agriculture. A hurricane, a new pest or disease, or a sudden fall in prices could undo years of patient work when growers were ultimately dependent on a single export commodity, usually copra, a laissez-faire economy, unskilled leadership and minimal technical or financial assistance. 'To sum up', wrote Belshaw in his scathing review of the post-war years, 'the effects of Fijian Administration on the economic growth of the Fijian people have been little short of disastrous, and the source of much difficulty lies within the structure and philosophy of the Administration as a political unit.'²⁰

Two major official inquiries published in 1959 and 1960 warned the Fijians that Ratu Sukuna's design for slow evolution from within was utterly bankrupt. Professor Spate declared: 'The main point is clear: a people cannot contract out of the century it lives in, nor can it be sole judge of the terms on which it enters, for modern economic life has also its own logic.'²¹ The road forward, the right philosophy, the right way to modernize was firmly to espouse democracy and individualism, to become a nation of independent farmers and so-called free agents within the capitalist economy.

The critiques were telling, much as many Fijians were angered by the Eurocentrism of their faith in capitalist models and naive if well-intended recommendations such as an assurance in the Burns Report that Fijian cultural life could be adequately sustained by the equivalent of Highland Games and eisteddfods - pleasant ornaments on the structures of a better, that is, Anglo-western, way of life.²² On another front the government was already under strong pressure from London and the International Labour Organization to abolish the last vestiges of 'forced labour'. The dismantling of the communal system began in earnest in 1961 with a series of amending regulations, removing all communal obligations and the program of work and finally abolishing the body of Fijian regulations in favour of increased regulatory power for provincial councils.²³ The Fijian courts and their relatively harsh and speedy sanctions were no longer available to local leaders: a man could now evade his taxes with relative ease, and only moral disapproval could be brought to bear on the lazy or improvident.

It was only logical to take the next step and abolish the Bulis and the tikina councils, and to give provincial councils directly elected majorities (in 1967).

Councillors (mata) represented large constituencies with the same problems of unity experienced by the amalgamated tikina, leaving many villages without a sense of participation and commitment to the province.²⁴ Not surprisingly there were spontaneous movements in many provinces in the 1970s to reconstitute the 'old tikina' (pre-1944) with which people still identified for church, sporting and cultural events; for the old tikina was still, after all these years, the locus of their best corporate energies. (At the time of writing these extra-legal entities under traditional leadership were being given some encouragement and recognition by authorities rather disillusioned by the fruits of provincial democracy, and further changes were in the air.)

Fijians first exercised the franchise at national level in 1963 when constitutional amendments provided for two nominated Fijian members and four elected from a communal roll. Similar and equal provision was made for Indian and European members, reducing the official government majority to one. Britain then began pushing towards self-government and independence at a faster pace than most Fijians would have wished. A Constitutional Conference in London in 1965 agreed on the continuation of three communal electoral rolls, with the Chinese and other non-islander minorities being counted in with the Europeans on the 'General' roll, and Pacific Islanders with the Fijians. A new system of cross-voting allowed voters of all races to vote together for a member from each race for 'national' seats, in addition to voting for a communal seat, so that each elector voted for four candidates. Ministerial government followed in 1967. Finally a Constitutional Conference in 1970, attended in London by the entire Legislative Council, incorporated similar principles into the constitution for independence, but reducing the relative weight of the 'General' representatives to eight of the fifty-two members (twelve Fijians, twelve Indians and three 'General' elected on communal rolls, ten Fijians, ten Indians, and five 'General' elected on national rolls through cross-voting).

In most other respects the Constitutional Instruments, handed to Ratu Sir Kamisese K.T. Mara by Prince Charles at a simple ceremony on 10 October 1970, provided for a Westminster-style government with the British Sovereign as Head of State represented by a Governor-General. (Fijians had remained attached to the throne - was any village home without a picture gallery of the Royals? - and would not

countenance the republican sympathies of most Indians, whose leaders, in the prevailing spirit of compromise, did not press the matter.) A crucial feature of the legislature was that eight of the twenty-two members of the new upper house of review, the Senate, were to be appointed by the Great Council of Chiefs (with seven nominated by the Prime Minister, six by the Leader of the Opposition and one on the advice of the Council of Rotuma, a local government body for that island, established in 1927 and comprising a District Officer, traditional chiefs and district representatives). The consent of six of the eight chiefly nominees had to be obtained to enact any legislation affecting certain entrenched measures - previous colonial laws - or new legislation regarding Fijian lands, customs and administration. In short the constitution gave iron-clad security, short of revolution, to the paramountcy of Fijian interests articulated at Cession, defended against Europeans by Gordon and Thurston, weakly maintained by their successors, never threatened by the Indians, and reaffirmed effectively in 1944 by Governor Mitchell and Ratu Sukuna in alliance with the local European elite.

The triumph of Fijian political and European economic interests at national level, matched by the unambiguous commitment of Indian leaders to national peace, allowed the ascendant Fijian leaders to foster multiracial participation in selected areas of national life such as higher education and the civil service, while accepting as historically determined the sharp racial boundaries in community life. Fiji under Alliance Party multiracial governments moved very comfortably into the international arena, enjoying an unexpected and enviable reputation for stability, despite the continuing problems of Indian farmers in negotiating with the Native Lands Trust Board for adequate leases. The rapid demarcation of Fijian reserves in the 1960s by the Native Lands Commission had removed nearly a million and a half acres from future non-Fijian use, while existing Indian tenants on these lands had the bitterness of seeing their leases expire and the land, in many cases, revert to bush, even where the Fijian owners themselves would have been glad not to lose their rents. The government did legislate, however, in 1976 to extend existing ten-year leases for twenty years and ensure that new leases would be for a minimum of thirty years - the payoff to landlords being a five-yearly review of the rents.²⁵ It still meant there were few Indians who could look forward to passing on to their sons the land they worked for decades. This condition made for high

mobility and openness to any avenue to success, including emigration to a few countries such as Canada willing to take skilled people Fiji could ill afford to lose.

Independent Fiji sustained an elaborate architecture of compromise, a balance of imbalances which prompted an anthropologist writing in 1977 to suggest that Fiji 'offered an unusual lesson for students of race relations: it may be the development of a culture that admits racial contention, allowing it to be acted out in regularized ways rather than repressing or denying it, which facilitates control of conflict and the achievement of integration'.²⁶ G.B. Milner has paid tribute to the Fijian demonstration of a 'modest, unassuming, though unmistakable self-confidence, this silent, amiable though eloquent protest against the monotony and the impersonal universalism of the Western world . . . a cultural achievement of the first order'.²⁷ Such claims are beyond empirical demonstration, but will ring true to those who have lived any length of time in the homes of ordinary Fijians, not least the shanty-dwellers on the fringes of Suva.

When the history of these decades can be written in detail, however, the facts of economic power may well diminish the triumph of Fijian political leadership and that enormous sense of unity, vitality and cultural pride for which Fijian leaders have gladly acknowledged their general debt to the British colonial arrangements analysed in this book. Two Australian multinational groups - Carpenters and Burns Philp - effortlessly maintained their domination, not to say stranglehold, over the importing, wholesaling and retailing sectors, while Fijians continued to be under-represented in the upper status levels of the workforce, especially in commerce. Though the government was forced to acquire CSR's sugar interests in 1973, and set up a most successful Fiji Sugar Corporation, there was little inclination to apply the model elsewhere. For the economy remained heavily dependent on foreign investment, most visibly in the tourist industry, with minimal restraints on the expatriation of profits. On the other hand new ventures such as pine-growing and cattle schemes were designed for a much greater local and Fijian participation. A country as small as Fiji with unemployment figures as large as New Zealand's could not afford to close the door on any kind of investment that would create jobs and compensate for the tragic loss of self-sufficiency in the villages.

The dilemmas of rural development throw into sharper relief some of the basic achievements of earlier colonial organization. For the simple basic needs that filter up from the villages through the modern administration in the required language of 'development priorities' are often requests for new housing, repairs to old housing, the clearing of drains and wells, the cutting of grass and undergrowth - the very tasks that were once attended to by the Bulis with communal labour.²⁸ Brookfield and his colleagues have admirably delineated for eastern Fiji the growing dependency of 'marginalized' peripheral areas on external subsidies and direction, accompanied by a paradoxical mix of 'disgust at the breakdown of traditional co-operation' and 'an equally general wish for greater individual opportunity'.²⁹ While generally predisposed, of course, to encourage the latter still further, they document the (irretrievable?) collapse of the ability of outer-island villages to exploit ancient horizontal linkages with other villages to redistribute resources in normal times and to survive major disasters such as hurricanes or droughts. Suva sends American food and relief workers where once Moala may have sent seed-yams and kinsmen.

And so after sixty years of sporadic rhetoric and twenty of effective policy, one dimension of individualism, self-reliance, may have finally taken hold of village life wherever leaders are absent, lacking or ignored. It means that young men or poor men cannot call on mutual aid in the construction of houses without a prohibitive outlay of food and cash for the builders; and there are old men and women who have none to care for them. If such individualism is accompanied by legalism, inequalities in land distribution (as owning units increase and decrease) cause corresponding inequalities in the distribution of wealth. Families are much less inclined to share wealth, if only to protect their aspirations for children whose future remittances may be the only way their parents and elderly relatives will survive in the villages at all. Already one finds, as Nankivell reports of Taveuni, 'truly desperate cases' of poverty and neglect, and this on the famed 'garden isle' of the group.³⁰ And it can be safely said the housing standards of Fijians are the worst they have been in centuries, with thin reed walls and stone-weighted sloping iron roofs 'almost universal' in most new settlements and extremely common in villages.³¹ Fijians have never had less to abandon when opportunity beckons elsewhere.

Yet others insist that wherever Fijians live, not least in Suva, groups still dominate their lives politically, culturally and socially. 'Urban Fijians', writes Nation, 'are no more individualistic than their village cousins.'³² Personal expenditure flows freely to the support of weddings, funerals, festivals, church collections and other social projects, as it always did through the whole colonial period. Named social groups remain at the very heart of Fijian life. Perhaps the emasculation of the communal system and the triumph of liberal concepts of democracy has not, after all, produced a new race of individualists; it has left many villagers, though, in a perilous state of marginalization and dependency. In the 1980s they have the unenviable task of regaining basic self-sufficiency and security while satisfying the desire of their remaining young people to achieve higher productivity, higher incomes, and greater self-realization from the interplay of their human and natural resources.

The Spate report offered Fijians in 1959 only two choices: individualism or 'a rigid authoritarian collectivism'.³³ The witness of this history is that at least until World War II Fijians had a special talent for a modest, low-energy but quite admirable and prosperous design for living and working together that avoided both extremes - a design which maintained enriching continuity with the past despite colonialist disparagement of everything they encapsuled in the words, na itovo vakaviti, the Fijian way. Perhaps the best hope for an uncertain future is that Ratu Sukuna's memorable defence of Fijian communal values in the colonial period will inspire strategies for more fully human modes of community development. The simplistic prescriptions of individualism, so clearly pernicious had they guided colonial policy in the 1870s, seem to have been equally bankrupt in the 1970s. Other than doubting that communal development can be led by teams of bureaucrats answering to the centre, it is surely premature to preclude the rise of innovative leaders closer to the groups with which Fijians still largely identify.

By and large Fijians commanded the banks if not always the main-stream of their colonial history. At independence their leaders resumed command of the sweep of the stream itself, with all its conflicting eddies and currents. Their challenge, in the face of urbanization without industrialization, unemployment, marketing problems for

sugar and copra, and continuing institutional weaknesses in local administration, is to ensure that neither Fijians nor Indians in sufficient number ever begin to feel that the stream has ceased to carry them, or has marooned them in stagnant pools on the fringe. In a world that is running out of easy answers, no one will be surprised if the entire nation looks to its own Fijian heritage for some of the arts of living well on islands, and to select aspects of its colonial experience for containing the continents.

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