

Introduction

The death on 7 February 1897 of Governor Sir John B. Thurston, champion of the integrity of Fijian community life for a quarter century, closed a remarkable segment in the history of European expansionism in the South Pacific.¹ An exuberant, tumultuous, and sophisticated collection of warring Fijian societies inhabiting some eighty islands in the group had been threatened but not overwhelmed by the relentless pressures of the Australasian frontier on their land and their autonomy, even though they had ceded sovereignty to Queen Victoria on 10 October 1874. According to a cherished Fijian myth, a pleasant reduction of the tortuous politics of those events, Fiji had not been ceded 'in anger to her late Majesty Queen Victoria; it was ceded in loving trust (loloma)' - a chiefly presentation, no less, which had obliged the gratified recipient, now Supreme Chief of Fiji, to redistribute power and privileges to the original donors and to assume part of the responsibility for safeguarding the prosperity and rights of the people.² In short the Deed of Cession, far more effectively than the New Zealander Maoris' Treaty of Waitangi, came to be seen by Fijians as a solemn charter for a British - Fijian partnership premised on verbal assurances (the cession itself was unconditional) that colonial rule would respect and maintain the interests of Fijian society as paramount. The needs of some 140,000 Fijians and their expectations of being governed 'righteously and in accordance with native usages and customs' were not to be subordinated to the contrary expectations of some 1500 European settlers and resident adventurers.³

The latter had done everything possible to disrupt preceding attempts to elaborate an independent government (on the lines of royal Hawaii or Tonga). Thurston, as chief minister to King Cakobau from mid 1872, had earned their enmity for exposing the ruthless self-interest in their 'patriotic' determination that Fiji would become a British bastion in the South Seas, a proper British colony run in the interests of Englishmen and Empire. The Fijians would be pacified and disarmed, in time an influx of European settlers and their descendants would gain internal self-government (as in New Zealand and the Australian colonies from which most of the settlers had come); it would then be an easy matter to dismantle whatever British protectionist legislation stood in the way of completing the transfer of splendid lands lying waste in the hands of

the idle natives to those better equipped by race and destiny to bring them into full production. Poll taxes would ensure that Fijians would learn the dignity of a disciplined day's work on European plantations, and wage rates would be so regulated that Fijians would continue to subsidize the capitalist economy by feeding and housing their dependants from their own labour and resources as before - either that, or choose to withdraw into reserves like the Melanesians of New Caledonia and watch the importation of more willing Pacific Islanders or Asians to work under indenture and reap the rewards of honest labour. (The machinery was already in place: many estates before Cession were worked and defended by New Hebrideans and Solomon Islanders.)

The dreams of 'rampant Anglo-Saxons' had not materialized.⁴ The first Governor, Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, felt he had a divine mission to make the islands an exception to the dismal history of colonialism. Fiji did not become a white man's country, although enormous concessions were made to maintain the viability of the better established planters and, in the 1880s, to develop a substantial sugar economy on lands already alienated before Cession or leased from the Fijians. Between 1879 and 1919 over 60,000 Indians were brought in under indenture to solve the labour problems of the European sector. Most were encouraged to stay on as free settlers, with remarkably little thought for the demographic repercussions that were to see their descendants outnumber the Fijians themselves by World War II, and embark on a long struggle, never fully realized, to win for themselves the equal place of dignity and power that was their birthright.⁵ In the year that Thurston died, however, when this story begins, some 11,000 Indians were isolated under indenture on company estates and only about a thousand time-expired men and their families were beginning to cultivate 1500 acres of land at Rewa and Navua. The success of Indian labour in developing an export economy, crucial for the expanding revenues of an impoverished government (£74,492 in 1897, £138,167 in 1903), was seen as giving the Fijians the time they needed - time to absorb the impact of colonial rule, to arrest the steady decrease in their numbers, and to enjoy the unusual institutions that had given them a powerful voice in colonial policy and wholly unprecedented peace and unity.

For colonial rule had brought to fruition the seeds of national unity sown over three millennia of migrations, trading and kinship connections, shifting political alliances between dominant lineages in war and peace, and common problems with Tongan imperialism. Though a substantial literature has explored many aspects of Fijian history through to the end of the nineteenth century, no systematic ethnohistorical reconstruction has lifted the veil over the era Fijians were taught to dismiss as 'the time of darkness', despite profoundly felt continuities with the past underpinning modern Fijian pride in their way of life.⁶ Many of the sources on which this history rests are written by Fijians to other Fijians in the Bauan dialect of the Bible, and are perhaps the best possible sources anywhere in the Pacific for illuminating island dimensions of the colonial experience. Nevertheless the interaction is predicated on a thoroughgoing penetration of 'the traditional' by a powerful neotraditional set of institutions (and often quite arbitrary regulations) vertically integrating Fijian society under the Crown. Select principles operating in traditional societies, notably those that were, like patriarchal authority, more immediately intelligible to European observers, became codified in an altogether new way. This was often at the expense of other principles such as a pervasive dualism inherent, for instance, in the allocation of spiritual and temporal power between complementary chiefly offices, or in the division of roles within many villages between two privileged groups, the original owners (itaukei) and the group which provided a chief to be installed by the itaukei. A traditional chief presiding over the cycle of service and tribute, drawing together the constituent groups of a local society under the aegis of ancestral and other gods, was only superficially the autocratic paterfamilias he seemed to outsiders. In truth he was at one intersection of a flexible web of horizontal and hierarchical 'paths of the land'. The regional varieties of kinship and social organization in old Fiji, the underlay of colonial reconstruction, defy summary analysis and description: suffice to emphasize here that the colonial order devised and imposed new, very much simplified principles of authority and territorial organization which may or may not have meshed with pre-existing sociopolitical realities. The resultant ambiguities, the continuing interplay of local and colonialist priorities, will often emerge in the chapters that follow. But with the poverty of local and regional studies in Fijian history and anthropology, there are

severe limits in a work of this scale to the illumination of local processes. The only solid framework of reference for the analysis of Fijian affairs is that which Gordon and Thurston created, and which Fijians rapidly made their own and defended tenaciously for a century as the bulwark of their neotraditional identity, of everything that was still distinctively Fijian.

Similarly there is no need here to pursue further the well-documented extravagance of Gordon's claim that the institutions of the Fijian Administration were 'purely native, and of spontaneous growth'.⁷ Had he argued that the system operated in a Fijian idiom and style that was very congenial to the participants, had he defended his and Thurston's innovations solely on the grounds that they were better suited than the machinery and laws of Westminster to meet both the needs of Fijian society and the minimal demands of colonial rule, his rationale would have better stood the test of time.⁸

The Governor was solemnly installed as the representative of the Supreme Chief, and in turn personally installed leading men as salaried governors or Roko Tui of fourteen provinces in which, more often than not, they were entitled to some kind of allegiance or cooperation from the constituent polities. For most of the provincial boundaries approximated the spheres of influence of the chiefly lineages dominant at Cession. High chiefs of character, and some of none, were virtually assured of government appointment. In feudal style the Governor administered an oath of allegiance and presented each new Roko Tui with a staff of office. (The symbolism of the latter was suitably ambiguous. While the quaint words of installation enjoined the Roko to shepherd his people with fatherly care, in the hands of more than one Roko the staff was only a little less lethal than a club.)

From its inception the powerful position of Roko Tui was highly acceptable to the high chiefs. In 1897 there were thirteen Rokos and four European Governor's Commissioners. The three provinces finally established for the interior - Colo North, Colo East and Colo West - preferred European rule to the elevation of any one of their broken and disunited social groups, while in Naitasiri the highest hereditary chief and his family were out of favour with the people and had reluctantly been dismissed. Ten of these Rokos could claim to be high chiefs of their provinces; none of the thirteen was

without status or connection with the provinces they ruled. Ra for instance was ruled by Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, one of the highest chiefs of Bau, which, as the dominant power in eastern Fiji, had long been able to call on parts of Ra to provide men for the Bauan armies. The salary of a senior Roko was on a par with a junior European stipendiary magistrate's (£350); in addition they received a twentieth share of all lease monies in their province. In the sugar provinces this share amounted to £200 or £300 a year. 'Fringe benefits', such as the use of 'prison' labour on private plantations, were considerable.

The strongest unit of local government was the district on tikina. The provinces were originally subdivided into eighty-four tikina, not primarily for administrative efficiency, but to correspond as closely as was convenient to less inclusive federations of allied social groups known as vanua. Usually the installed chiefs of the vanua were appointed to take charge of the preparation of taxes and all government work. They were in this capacity styled Buli and were generally responsible to the Roko for the state of the villages and for implementing the resolutions of the various councils and the Native Regulations described below. Their salary was only nominal, £3 and £10 a year, because they had the right both by custom as chief (in most areas) and by regulation as Buli to levy services (lala) from their people in food contributions, traditional manufactures and labour to meet their own personal needs and those of the community. (The Rokos enjoyed a similar right, and likewise all hereditary chiefs, subject to the discretion and definition of the Roko or Buli.) The Buli also received a twentieth share of the rent monies of his district.

The power of the Buli was reinforced by a system of courts. Native stipendiary magistrates presided alone on district courts and sat with the European stipendiary magistrate on provincial courts, which were the courts of first instance only for serious charges such as arson or rape. These courts implemented a stringent code of Native Regulations which were framed by a board in close consultation with Fijian leaders. They gave the force of law to what was defined as reasonable and just if Fijian hierarchical societies were to survive the superimposition of colonial rule. A man had to remain in his village, then, and keep planting (actual quantities were specified), cooperate with the chiefs in the communal enterprises (disobedience became a legal offence), bring his grievances

to orderly councils and courts, and play his part in all the ceremonial occasions demanded either by custom or the new order. To European observers the Native Regulations appeared to work only in the interests of particular chiefs; in the absence of democracy the people apparently had no redress against the abuse of power. But it was easy to intrigue against an oppressor and bring district or provincial administration to a standstill until Government House intervened. Nothing could be more misleading, it will be seen, than the idea that Fijian political processes were 'frozen' by the new colonial order.

The weakest link in the system was at village level, where the elected turaga ni koro or village headman had the unenviable task of implementing all the orders of higher officials while answering for the conduct of his relatives and friends in the village. He could in practice do very little without the support of village leaders who were often reluctant to assume a position that gave responsibility without reward. The Buli summoned these turaga ni koro and 'chiefs of the land' (however defined locally) to a monthly district council. They discussed every aspect of village life, not distinguishing between traditional activities and the work of government proper. Then in October or November of each year the Bulis and chiefs of the whole province met in a more formal provincial council and submitted for the Governor's assent resolutions which then had the force of law. Finally, from time to time - but in principle annually - the Governor convened the Council of Chiefs (Bosevakaturaga) where the assembled Rokos and representatives of lesser officials advised the colonial government on many matters referred to them or raised on their own initiative. It provided an infinitely more congenial forum than the incomprehensible offshoot of Westminster existing in the Legislative Council, though later the chiefs were represented there as well.⁹ The resolutions of the assembled chiefs could not be disregarded lightly so long as the government was serious in maintaining the paramountcy of Fijian interests. A committee of the Council sent a personalized report of the state of the people to the Sovereign, who replied with suitable expressions of interest in their welfare and pleasure in their abiding loyalty.¹⁰

The surprising trust Fijians began to develop in British rule was strained but not undermined by the obligation to pay substantial taxes in kind. Thurston, first Auditor-General of the colonial government, designed

for Gordon a taxation scheme that made unaccustomed demands on the villages by requiring all able-bodied men to cultivate a marketable crop in a communal tax field under the direction of the chiefs. The scheme was defended as a development of the traditional lala rights of chiefs to command garden planting to meet their own needs and ensure the prosperity of the people. The produce of each district had to realize a cash figure as part of the sum allocated to the province by the Legislative Council. The produce was collected at central points, shipped to Suva or Levuka and sold by tender to the highest bidder. Prices realized were often double the price Fijians would have received in small, direct dealings with the storekeeper-agents of the European commercial houses, more than double if payment was made - as was the practice - in goods marked up at a higher price to Fijians. In good years cash refunds were returned to the producers, too late perhaps to act as a direct incentive to production, but pleasant windfalls which helped them buy imported drapery and foods, build churches and schools, and especially to maintain a fleet of sailing cutters which gave them an independent means of transport probably better than villages in more remote coastal areas have ever had.

Thurston championed the scheme under Gordon and expanded it during his own governorship (1888-97) as a rational management of the colony's natural resources and the only feasible way of making Fijians substantial producers in their own right. Although he experimented with a variety of new commodities such as coffee and cinnamon, bananas and especially coconuts were the only promising export crops until the expansion of the sugar industry. Before Gordon's departure in 1880, Thurston went as Colonial Secretary to Sydney where he persuaded the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) to establish its first mill at Nausori, and shortly afterwards another was built at Rarawai, Ba. In the first decade of cane production to 1889 Fijians grew 53,870 tons worth £29,599 at the Nausori mill, earning considerable refunds above the provincial tax assessments. The western side of Viti Levu was better suited to cane. In a good year such as 1889 the 5963 people of Ba and Yasawas earned a refund of £2339 from the proceeds of their cane fields.¹¹

Despite its financial success and political advantages to Fijians, the immediate physical demands of tax work were a chronic source of the grumbling that seems endemic in any society where initiative comes from above. The scheme

presented major logistical problems and required a level of managerial or accounting skill that was not easily found among Fijian leaders. European tax inspectors had to be employed to supervise the work, and a colony as poor as Fiji often had to make do with men recruited locally. Little love was lost between many of these men and Fijian officials. When Thurston's strong but sympathetic hand was taken away in 1897, the scheme began to generate a pattern of non-cooperation that led to its collapse, as will be seen, within a decade.

The native taxation scheme was particularly resented by the European settlers: more than anything else it gave teeth to the government policy of insulating Fijians from the need to divert their labour resources to the plantations, and to become wholly dependent on local merchants. Excluded from any real say in the colony's affairs, deprived even of elected members in the Legislative Council until 1904, local Europeans despaired of Fijians ever being accorded the full personal liberty of British subjects, the liberty above all else to sell their lands and become a free-floating pool of labour. Although the Europeans and the Indians were entirely exempt from legislation designed to meet the needs of Fijian societies, they were severely restricted in their dealing with Fijians. Native Dealings ordinances limited the amount that could be recovered from a Fijian in the courts. Labour recruiting was closely regulated. Alienation of Fijian land, except to the Crown, was halted, and leases limited to twenty-one years. All pre-Cession claims were submitted to a Lands Claims Commission. True, the Commissioners took a generous view of some quite outrageous pre-Cession transactions by which thousands of prime acres had been exchanged for muskets, whisky and trade goods, but less than a third (517) of the 1683 applications were granted as claimed; 390 were granted ex gratia in whole or part, and about half the 800,000 acres claimed were returned to the Fijian owners.¹²

Gordon had wanted the finality of legal tenure to apply not only to lands alienated before Cession but also to Fijian lands, the whole of which had been theoretically transferred to the Crown by the Deed of Cession. He had come with instructions to make a settlement that did full justice to the existing rights and future needs of Fijian communities, and Thurston would have filled him in on the ample assurances given to the chiefs on that score. The problems of leaving Fijian lands under customary tenure

were obvious: where rights were vague or conflicting, where ownership was disputed or uncertain, there could be no easy way of settling the kind of disputes that in former times had been resolved by war, no way of knowing which land was unclaimed and at the disposal of the Crown, and no efficient way of arranging leases to Europeans and, later, the Indians.

To make matters worse, Fijian systems of land tenure were little understood even by the most experienced observers. In no area of Fijian life was Gordon's ostensible policy of building on existing institutions more fraught with difficulty; the very desire to codify and standardize what in reality were flexible sets of principles pertaining to decisions about land (and different from one community to another) was contradictory. It has been brilliantly shown by Peter France in The Charter of the Land that Gordon and his advisers were creating an ill-founded orthodoxy when they insisted that Fijian land customs had 'the inflexibility and precision of a legal system' which they then thought they were merely writing into the laws of the colony.¹³

What Gordon did, it seems, was to elicit the consent of the Council of Chiefs to the notion that Fijian land was inalienable and that there had to be an 'authentic' land-owning unit. The chiefs chose the mataqali, the word that was in general use to describe the kinship or household groups with which chiefs had dealings at village level. (It later came for legal purposes to have everywhere the meaning it had in Bau, a clan or patrilineal descent group of second order inclusiveness.) When the first Native Lands Commission was established in 1880 to begin the long task of registering land ownership to mataqali throughout the group, the Commissioners met resistance and confusion, and the work was abandoned. Thurston revised Gordon's original legislation in 1892 and the new Native Lands Commissioner, Basil Thomson, conducted investigations in Rewa, Ba and Tailevu. He provided the first detailed evidence of actual tenure practice: in Rewa, land and sometimes many scattered pieces of land were held by individuals, bequeathed to male heirs, and leased to other individuals. Thomson recorded ten conditions under which land rights could be transferred: so much for inalienability. In Ba, a province full of recently dislocated people, the people wanted to revive dormant rights to ancestral lands that now offered the prospect of income from rents. In Tailevu, Thomson discovered that

land rights were in most cases recently established and often conflicting, and that no one wanted the mataqali to be the unit of ownership. 'The self-conscious solicitude evinced by European legislators for the preservation of an immemorial system of Fijian land tenure', concludes France, 'was not shared by those Fijians who gave evidence before Thomson's Commission: they sought to provide for the future rather than to preserve the past.'¹⁴

Under Thomson's successors the Native Lands Commission tried to resolve the chaos by first classifying the people into descent groups and then awarding blocks of land to each mataqali. Though the people had pressed for family holdings to be recorded, it was felt that the monumental task of surveying and registering the boundaries of every small parcel of land was beyond the resources of the colony. Like it or not, Fijians had to learn to live with an arbitrary settlement and a cumbersome unit of ownership.

Despite the weakness of its theoretical justification, it will be argued that in the long run there were advantages in compromise and legal clarity. Fijian land rights as established by colonial law, with all the clumsy contradictions analysed by scholars, were to withstand the attacks of those Europeans who recognized from the beginning that the easier alternative - individualized land tenure in fee simple - was the classic solution (as in Hawaii and New Zealand) for the rapid transfer of native land to alien lands. If Gordon's belief that every inch of Fiji had an undisputed communal owner from time immemorial was a misconception, it was, from the Fijian point of view, a singularly fortunate one. The rights of the Crown under the Deed of Cession were never exercised except to acquire land so poor or remote that no community bothered to pursue or invent a claim. (To these Crown lands were later added the lands of registered mataqali that became extinct.) Gordon's manifest unwillingness to pursue the rights of the Crown more aggressively meant that future government-sponsored schemes for European settlement would be limited to offering leases of Fijian lands. Fiji's existing European estates, though very extensive indeed in places such as Taveuni, had little hope of further expansion so long as Gordon's policies were maintained.

Despite problems that will become more apparent in later chapters, it was no mean legacy of power, security and dignity that Gordon and Thurston bequeathed the Fijian people. The irony is that the very success of their

administrative and political arrangements to dispel the chiefs' disarray and despair at Cession, to keep Fiji Fijian, was taken for granted by the end of the century. More often than not Fijians chose to exercise their local autonomy in ways that did not conform to more conventional British concepts of progress. And now there were newcomers in government who yearned to redefine the white man's burden in Fiji.

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