Overview of Chapters 12–13
Polities of the Natu Yasawa: The Yasawa Group

Including the outlier of Viwa and excluding the island of Wayasewa which falls within the territory of the Sabutoyatoya yavusa of Vuda, the Yasawa Group comprises seven permanently inhabited islands and many small islands. The main group stretches over a distance of about 80 km in a north-north-easterly direction from Waya in the south to Yasawa in the north. About 23 km to the north-east of Yasawa lies the uninhabited rocky islet of Alewa Kalou, or Round Island, with inaccessible slopes rising to a height of 152 m. These islands stand within the shallow seas to the east of the Great Sea Reef. Within these seas there is a maze of barrier reefs and isolated coral patches with the Ethel Reefs among them. The only safe passage is between Yasawa and Round Island, the passage used by Captain Bligh in May 1789 in the course of his epic journey by ship’s launch from near Tofua, Tonga, to Koepang, Timor, after the mutiny by the crew of the Bounty.

Except for the coral cay of Viwa and the elevated limestone islet of Sawa-i-lau off the south-east tip of Yasawa, the islands are volcanic in origin. They are generally long and narrow, and the major islands are high, with peaks rising to 610 m above sea level. Their main ridges follow closely to the west coasts, the west slopes being steep and drained by short water courses flowing through deep valleys, while the east slopes are more gradual and drained by longer streams often ending in mangrove swamps and lagoons. The surface of the islands is rugged and broken, and the area of land suitable for planting is limited. At the mouths of streams there are areas of flat land up to 16 ha in extent, often with light sandy soil. The peaks and high ridges are wooded, especially on the windward side, but otherwise the slopes are grassy and mostly bare of trees due to cultivation and fires. The dry climate and the soil have been favourable for the production of copra; and during a limited period in the 1870s when there was a world-wide shortage following the American Civil War, cotton was grown on some of the islands by and for Europeans. The climate was also favourable for the production of fibre for the making of sail mats, which attracted attention from people from Bua and Bau, from Tongans and, probably, from Samoans.

At the time of my visits in the 1950s, there were four villages on Waya, three on Viwa, seven on Naviti, one on Yaqweta, two on Matacawalevu, four on Nacula and six on Yasawa, with a total population of about 4000, compared with the 1891 Census figure of 3166. The latter figure is low because of the dire effects of the 1875 epidemic of measles.

The Yasawa Group and outside influences
The present people of the Yasawa Group are largely descended from bands of dissidents, renegades and refugees who came from along the north coast of Viti Levu, especially from Vitogo, Votua, Ba and Rakiraki. (My findings generally support Wilkes 1845:260). They settled in small groups which increased or decreased in number both through natural causes but especially through amalgamation with new bands from Viti Levu or local fission and fusion. They appointed their
own separate leaders either from the original band or from new bands who proved themselves to be more energetic and acceptable. They did not have paramount leaders, certainly not from outside their polities and islands. They were renowned to be very independent, quarrelsome and dangerous if offended, but welcoming to those who came with good will. They were probably as suspicious of early European visitors as these visitors were of them.

Bligh had received some information about Fijians from Captain Cook, so when passing through Fiji waters on his way to Timor after the *Bounty* mutiny, he must have been apprehensive of his possible reception when, after spotting tall, rocky, partly-wooded islands which are presumed to have been the Yasawa group, he was 'chased by two large canoes'. He did not wait to find out what his reception might have been but proceeded with all speed through Round Island Passage.

The first to record first-hand information about the behaviour of the people of the Yasawa group was Commodore Charles Wilkes who spent part of 1840 in Fiji with his squadron of four vessels comprising the United States Exploring Expedition. The Expedition spent three months surveying the more important islands and reefs and gathering material for a new chart of the Group. Wilkes landed on Round Island but could not climb to the summit. The party then went on to the island of Yasawa and climbed to the top of the major peak of Taucake. They landed with 'a strong party, well armed, as we knew the natives were particularly savage.' (Wilkes 1845:256). However, the 'natives appeared friendly and were powerless from the late depredations'— by Gigi, chief of Galoa, an island off Macuata, who earlier in the year had led a raid to the Yasawa Group and devastated gardens and villages. Wilkes recorded (1845:232) that Gigi was 'remarkable for the energy of his character, and his savage disposition when offended.' Wilkes then went on to an islet south of Naviti where he landed for observations, being acutely conscious that his activities were the subject of observation by the inhabitants of Naviti. He then climbed the peak on Wayasewa i yata, keeping guard constantly against attack. The Waya islanders were said to be quite independent of any authority and any attempts to subjugate them were unsuccessful. They kept themselves secure within their own defences and only went forth when making an incursion against defenceless villages of other islands. They had a reputation among their neighbours for cruel conduct and savagery. I consider it remarkable that no clash occurred during the survey of the Yasawa Group, as it did in Malolo when two ship’s officers, including Wilkes’ nephew, were killed after an indiscretion on the part of the visitors. In revenge, Wilkes landed parties on Malolo, destroyed the food gardens and the two villages and killed fifty-seven Fijians without loss to themselves (Wilkes 1845:281). The Malolo people then abjectly surrendered. Wilkes, somewhat smugly but perhaps as justification for the punishment of the people of Malolo, claimed (Wilkes 1845:285) that ‘Such has been the effect on the people of Malolo, that they have since been found the most civil, harmless, and well-disposed natives of the group.’ Wilkes was accused of murder when he returned home to the United States, and he defended his actions by saying that Fijians could not expect to behave as they did without punishment. It is difficult to judge Wilkes’ actions outside the context of the times, but it should be noted that similar action by Fijians sometimes resulted in harsh treatment at the hands of other visiting naval vessels.

Some twenty years later, a boat belonging to the Reverend J. Binner, Wesleyan missionary and trader, had gone to Waya to trade for coconut oil and beche de mer, carrying a crew of an Englishman, an American and some natives. The natives of Waya captured the boat, ate the crew and took the merchandise. The US corvette *Vandalia* arrived at Levuka and, at the request of the American Consul, the commander, Captain Sinclair, sent a party of fifty to Waya to demand the murderers and obtain indemnity. The Waya people numbering some 500 men defied the party and were attacked by the Americans in their fort on the summit of a hill about 244 m high. Some twenty of the Wayans were killed, as many wounded, and their village and fort were burned at a cost of five Americans wounded (Pritchard 1866:212–13). Presumably this was the same
incident to which Mrs Smythe referred (Smythe 1864:93) though she said that the crew was one American, one German and a coloured man who leaped overboard and was probably eaten by sharks. The other two were eaten by humans. This was said to be in revenge for ‘a very shameful piece of dishonesty practised on them by some white men a short time before.’ Evidently she had discussed the matter with Tui Vuda, who said that he was often at war with the Waya people. She said that she had been told that the American operations had been so unskilfully conducted that the Wayans claimed a victory. Pritchard, who had just taken over the position of British Consul, and Mr Binner are probably more reliable, and were in touch with the commander of the Vandalia. Nevertheless, Mrs Smythe may well have been right about the Wayan claims. They were very proud people.

Relations between the people of the Yasawa group and other Fijian polities are intricate and of the greatest interest in providing evidence of how such relationships originated and developed. To place them in perspective, it is first necessary to understand the then socio-political situation of these other polities. The people of the Yasawa Group, when quarrelling among themselves in the mid-19th century, would come to be involved in the affairs of major eastern polities especially those of Bau, Bua and Macuata, as well as Tonga. Before that, it seems, there had been periodic visits between the people of these places and those of the Yasawa group, presumably based on requirements for the sail mats for which the Yasawa people were famous, and some intermarriage had taken place. In the 19th century however, Bau and Bua were vying for dominance over the group, and this rivalry manifested itself particularly in the islands to the north. Latterly Ma’afu and his lieutenants also had some considerable involvement in the affairs of the Group.

The Lands Claims Commission (LCC) in 1881 considered twenty claims for land in the Yasawa Group. Before considering individual applications, the Commission heard general evidence about the polities in the group from Navatuorooro, native magistrate of Matakavalevu, and John Stark, a trader who lived in the group from 1864 to 1875; and from Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, eldest son of Cakobau, then the Roko Tui Tailevu, who in his younger days was in the habit of visiting the Group, especially Nacula and Yasawairara, where he was welcomed in a manner befitting a high chief of Bau. Indeed the people of Naviti, whose chief had a Tongan mother and were tending towards the Tongan-influenced Bua, presented him with a basket of earth by way of soro qele. This in the old days implied that the people conferred rights over the land and especially the fruits of the land in order to recognise the establishment of a qali or tributary relationship. After the arrival of Europeans, some considered it appropriate to confer the right to sell land irrespective of the wishes of the traditional landowners. This was hotly argued against, and the Governor in Council, when considering land claims based in such sales, would not accept that a paramount could sell land without evidence of the endorsement of the traditional landowners.

In considering this evidence, the LCC noted that the islands received occasional visits from Bua chiefs, and from Nayagodamu, a high Bau chief and brother of Cakobau. Probably reflecting an old quarrel when they were all living on the island of Nacula, Nacula was quarrelling with the Vanuakula people of Matakavalevu; and Nacula seemed to favour a connection with Bua after the introduction of Christianity by Bua and Tonga, when the group was placed within the Bua circuit. Matakavalevu inclined towards Bau especially after a visit from Nayagodamu. Yasawa was apparently divided by internal quarrels between Teci and Yasawairara, and Teci sought the help of Macuata. However, up to the time of Cakobau’s coronation as Tui Viti in 1867, the various island polities were independent of each other and of outside political authority, although Tui Bua took Ma’afu’s lieutenant, Wainiqolo, along the islands in an attempt to induce them to come to Bua. There was no paramount chief, and the polities quarrelled both internally and with each other. The first attempt to unify the group for the purposes of government was in 1866 when the British Consul, Jones, met with the chiefs of the group, and Roko Dinono, a chief of Yasawairara,
was appointed by Bua to be magistrate for the group. He had previously exercised magisterial functions, having been appointed apparently by the Tongans. After the coronation of Cakobau in 1867, Sovatabua of Nacula was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the group under Bau, but his powers were limited to matters of general politics relating to Cakobau as King, and did not extend to local matters.

To understand the situation in the Yasawa Group, then, it is necessary to have some understanding of the situation developing in the eastern polities of Bau, Bua and Macuata, a situation overseen by the *eminence grise* of Ma’afu. At that time Bua had been involved in internal warring between two high chiefs, Ra Masima, the Tui Bua, and his cousin Tui Muru which continued until Tui Bua asked Bau for help in return for his daughter. Fighting was indecisive until 1845 when Tui Muru accepted Christianity and made peace with Tui Bua. Macuata was associated with Bau, though the exact relationship is not clear. Bau probably considered Macuata as *qali* or tributary, whereas Macuata was ambivalent about the relationship, viewing it more as an association among equals. Macuata leadership was the subject of violent rivalry with intervention from Bau which wanted to maintain what it saw to be its position in the region and protect it from Ma’afu and the Tongans with their expansionist ends. The Tongan high-ranking chief, Ma’afu, and his lieutenants Semisi Fifita and Wainiqolo (Vainikolo in Tongan) at Vanua Balavu, were using their considerable force of men under the guise of spreading Christianity. Ma’afu was expanding Tongan influence westward over Fiji and presumably had pan-Fijian ambitions. In Macuata and Bua, Ma’afu took advantage of the quarrelling by playing one side off against the other and made his presence felt in the Yasawas too.

In a case which was investigated in Levuka in September 1861 by Captain Leveque of the French corvette *Cornélie*, the head of the French Roman Catholic mission in Fiji, Père Bréheret, complained that Ma’afu’s lieutenant Semisi had flogged some Roman Catholic natives at Yasawa. Captain Leveque sent for Cakobau, the ‘acknowledged supreme chief of Fiji in treaty with France’, and for Ma’afu as the representative in Fiji of the King of Tonga. Cakobau, under the terms of the treaty, was asked to send for Semisi, and because he did not comply with this request as promptly as the Captain thought he should, he was detained on board the *Cornélie* until Semisi appeared. Not unnaturally, Cakobau was upset about his detention and when he later saw the British Consul, Pritchard, ‘he was writhing under the effects of his detention’ and anxious to restore his own prestige among the Fijians (Pritchard 1866:282). The case was heard on board the *Cornélie* in the presence of Cakobau and Ma’afu, and Ma’afu admitted that Semisi had flogged the natives but not because they were Roman Catholics. Père Bréheret was able to satisfy Captain Leveque that their religion was the cause of the flogging and the latter deported Semisi, taking him to New Caledonia because he thought that Cakobau would not punish a Tongan of Semisi’s rank and influence. It is not known what happened when he reached New Caledonia.

Togitogi, chief of Nacula and one of those flogged, told Pritchard (1866:304) about the circumstances leading up to this deportation of Semisi. Before the Christian religion came to the Yasawa Group, there had always been jealousy between Togitogi and Sovatabua, also of Nacula. When Christianity arrived, Sovatabua became a Wesleyan in order to get the help of the Tongans against Togitogi and to make him chief instead. Togitogi became a Roman Catholic, saying that he did not want the Tongans to come. He wanted his lands to be ceded to the Queen of Great Britain with Bau and all Fiji. Tongans bringing Christianity to Yasawa left the Wesleyan teacher Maika at Yasawa i rara, but Togitogi would not follow Maika’s teachings, because he represented the Tongans who were siding with Sovatabua. Sovatabua went to Maika at Yasawa i rara and told him that Togitogi and others were Roman Catholics and were making the land bad. Maika said that he
would bring the Tongans to make the Roman Catholics give up their religion, and to get sail mats for Ma’afu and Semisi. Maika had already complained about Togitogi not giving him food when he went to preach at Nacula and not sending him enough fish and yams to Yasawa i rara.

Semisi himself had then come to Tamasua, Yasawa, and sent for Togitogi who went there with some other minor chiefs of Nacula. Semisi, the Tui Bua and Maika who was also from Bua together with many other Tongans were waiting for them. Semisi asked Togitogi why he did not follow Maika and Tui Bua, and said he was a bad man and must be flogged. Togitogi was flogged, kicked in the ribs and the head and struck in the eye. He was told that he must give the Yasawa islands to Tonga and give up the Roman Catholic religion. At this stage, an English trader, Hicks, who happened to be at Yasawa at the time, intervened. Tui Bua had said that the Tongans were strong and the white men were weak, and the people from Nacula were making the land bad and divided. However, Semisi stopped the flogging. He said that he was returning to Ma’afu who would send Wainiqolo, his other lieutenant, down and he would make the land bad and would continue the flogging unless they gave their land to Tonga. Semisi then sent his men down to Nacula, and they took everything away from Togitogi’s part of the village and many things from Sovatabua’s part. Semisi also sent for two men of Waya who had become Roman Catholic and told them that if they did not follow Maika, he would send Wainiqolo to make the land bad for them. He threatened that what the Americans had done on Waya was nothing to what the Tongans had the strength to do. They promised to do what they were told to do, but it was doubtful whether the Tongans would have attacked such a difficult island as Waya. It was sufficient for their purposes if they could take control of Waya by making the local chiefs jealous with each other and by helping one of the chiefs and so gain political control. The chief of Naviti escaped the cruelty of the Tongans because his mother was a Tongan and Semisi could not ignore his claims on the Tongans. But for this relationship, the Naviti chief would have been deposed by the Tongans in favour of someone who would have been their ready tool because his position and power would have depended on them. The Naviti chief was not concerned about Maika, because he had his own Wesleyan teachers from Rewa. They were good men and did not interfere in local politics. Before going, Semisi had said that Roko Dinono was to be chief over all the Yasawa Group, assisted by Raitona, and that the Yasawa Group now belonged to Tonga, Roko Dinono, Raitona, Sovatabua and Maika having signed a paper to this effect.

This illustrates how Ma’afu, through his lieutenants and the assistance of Tui Bua whose mother was Tongan, attempted to extend his authority to the Yasawa Group by imposing the Tongan Wesleyan religion on the people and meeting any opposition with brute force. He also used his cunning to divide the loyalties of local chiefs, seeking out existing jealousies and turning them to his advantage. The account also shows how Bau and Tonga continued their machinations to develop their respective power over territory which did not owe them traditional loyalty. The Yasawa Group was a valuable source of sail mats which both Bau and Ma’afu needed for their war canoes, and it may be that it was a need to control this source which diverted the attention of these two major eastern powers to what appears at first sight to be an out-of-the-way and otherwise unimportant string of islands, of little value for their natural resources and their potential manpower.

The polities of the Yasawa Group are included in the present tikina of Naviti and Yasawa.
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