Preface

The first aim of my research is to determine, from oral accounts I recorded over a period of some fifty years, how Fijians especially in western areas of Fiji currently understand and explain (a) the origins, characteristics, development and interactions of the social and political divisions of late pre-Colonial traditional Fijian society, and (b) the general principles of traditional land tenure. The second aim is to assess the reasoning, consistency and, where possible, the historical accuracy of such understandings.

The period on which the research concentrates is the two centuries or so immediately prior to Cession. Under the Deed of Cession a number of the major chiefs of Fiji had offered to cede Fiji to Queen Victoria; and after the offer had been accepted, Fiji became a British Crown Colony on 10th October 1874. The traditional Fijian society and system of land tenure with which the project is particularly concerned are referred to in this work as ‘pre-Colonial’ or ‘pre-Cession’ Fijian society. For the sake of chronological convenience, pre-Colonial Fijian society has been divided into ‘late prehistoric’ and ‘proto-historic’ periods. ‘Proto-historic’ refers to the century ending at Cession in 1874 and beginning with the arrival of the first outsiders to have significant interaction with Fijians.

Other studies of Fijian traditional social structure have generally concentrated on areas in the eastern parts of Viti Levu and in other parts of Fiji to the east of the main island (the so-called Na Tu i Cake).Partly for this reason and partly because I have been familiar with the area since 1951, my investigations have concentrated on the relatively little known west (the Yasayasa vakaRa). It is hoped that the outcome of my research will now enable people to endorse more easily the line with which I introduce Chapter 1, ‘But westward look, the land is bright.’

Research into pre-Colonial Fijian society began incidentally when I was an officer of the Colonial Service in the Fiji District Administration and in the Fijian Administration in the 1950s and 1960s. My experience and general investigations while a member of these two Administrations served as a background to my later formal research conducted directly in relation to this project. When I returned to carry out the latter research in the 1990s, I endeavoured to operate through both these Administrations as well as through the currently recognised socio-political units or polities.

My personal involvement in Fiji

As a member of the British Colonial Service (later Her Majesty’s Overseas Civil Service), I served from 1951 to 1971 in the Fiji Civil Service, as a member of the Fijian Administrative Service. As was the usual practice, I spent part of my time as a member of the District Administration and part of the time in the Secretariat. I was also fortunate to spend some time in the Fijian Affairs Office, working with the fourteen provinces of the Fijian Administration which ran parallel with the District Administration.

I lived for a year in what is now the township of Vaileka, in the area of Rakiraki, when I was the District Officer, Ra, in the early 1950s; and my administrative duties took me to every village in the province of Ra at least once. I was also able to pay visits to archaeological and other sites, including those of special spiritual importance on the top of the Nakauvadra Range, and to hold many discussions about archaeological and socio-political matters and about local communalects. I was District Officer for Lautoka, Nadi and the Yasawa Group for two periods in the early 1950s, and visited every village at least once and usually at least twice. During the next 17 years, I was at various times District Officer for Rotuma, for Suva and for Navua covering Namosi and Serua.
Later I held the post of Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs and Local Government (DSFALG), and in the course of my duties I visited all the main parts of Fiji except for the Lau Archipelago. Later I was appointed to be the Commissioner of the Northern Division which comprised the three Provinces of Bua, Cakaudrove and Macuata; and I visited all the villages in these three Provinces.

In the 1990s, during the period of my postgraduate research, many months were spent in Rakiraki and Vuda/Nadi/Nawaka. Return to the Yasawa Group was practicable only once in the 1990s, because of difficulties of transport and shortage of time. The data obtained from the earlier investigations were duly integrated with the information gained from the research undertaken in the 1990s.

It has been of assistance to me that, apart from some fluency in Standard Fijian, I have been able to achieve a sufficient working knowledge of the Rakiraki/Navatu communalects and of the western communalects, so that I was able to understand and carry on a reasonable level of conversation in either these local communalects or in Standard Fijian. During discussions with Fijians, the medium of conversation was, as far as possible, that with which the Fijians were most comfortable.

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