What do we mean when we talk about an ethos, or a soul of a nation? Ethos is defined as ‘the distinctive character, spirit and attitudes of people, culture, era.’ Soul is defined as ‘the spirit or immaterial part of man, the seal of human personality, intellect, will and emotions.’

Why is it important that we try to identify a soul or ethos? The fact is all nations of people do have a soul or an ethos by which they are identified. It is describing, understanding and living by it that is sometimes difficult. In Australia, any new citizen must first be able to talk about and understand mateship. This does exemplify the Australian character, although Australia is a nation of many diverse people. The British, Scots, Irish and Welsh exemplify particular characteristics which they never lose. Their ethos is their core. The Americans seem to honour their founding fathers and have a very strong belief in their constitution. I can’t define it, but I sense the Tongans and Samoans have a soul. France certainly has one. I supposed it would be fair to say that, as far as many of the Muslim countries are concerned, their soul resides in Islamic belief. This brings up the question as to whether belief in God should constitute the soul of a nation. However, in the Western world, God means different things to different people.

So, what about Fiji?

In a national sense I think respected academic, Professor Asesela Ravuvu came close to describing the Fijian soul meaningfully. He said, ‘The Fijian term Vanua, has physical, social and cultural dimensions which are interrelated. It does not mean only the land area one is identified with, and the vegetation, animal life and other objects on it, but it also includes the social and cultural system — the people, their traditions and customs, beliefs and values, and the various other institutions established for the sake of achieving harmony, solidarity and prosperity within a particular coastal context. It provides a sense of identity and belonging.’

While I accept that there are many races of people living in Fiji, I believe that the fundamental soul of the nation resides in the nature of the culture of the indigenous people. That is where the search for a soul must begin. But to ascribe Vanua as the appropriate soul or ethos for all diverse people who live in Fiji would be wrong. Many do not own any land.

We must search for another characteristic and I believe one that does or should fit all the people of Fiji is the concept of vakaturaga. Vakaturaga embraces concepts such as respect, humility, love and kindness. It includes someone who listens
to others. It embraces tolerance and understanding. It is generally ascribed to a leader and the way he or she leads. It is a concept that transcends all racial and religious divisions.

Could this be the elusive factor we are searching for? Doesn’t this fit the definitions stated above? Vakaturaga behaviour also embraces many values, such as justice, dignity, morality, hope, trust and political correctness. It is also a concept that is well understood by most people in Fiji. If we were all to manifest vakaturaga behaviour, we could indeed be an example to the world.