Interlude: A Conversation of Spirits

You could not see them, nor could you hear the way they communicated, for they were merely vapours. But they were indeed the spirits of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau.

They floated in the breeze above Vanuabalavu and looked down upon Laisenia Qarase sitting on the ground cutting copra. ‘This is ridiculous,’ exclaimed Mara angrily. ‘The man was elected leader of the nation. How long before Bainimarama has elections?’

‘He said September 2014,’ responded Ratu Penaia, before asking, ‘Do you think Qarase made a mess of things?’

‘Perhaps. Unfortunately he was a victim of his own willingness to accommodate the multi-party provisions of the constitution. This resulted in a bloated cabinet, a breakdown in administrative control and discipline, and massive costs.’

‘But what about the corruption?’

‘That started in our time, Ratu Penaia. We can’t just blame Qarase,’ Mara stated.

‘Do you think he should have dismissed Bainimarama?’

‘I doubt he could have. Bainimarama was determined to overthrow him and he had the guns,’ said Ratu Mara sadly.

There was silence for a while as they floated towards Taveuni. Then Ratu Penaia commented, ‘Perhaps we are all to blame. We made mistakes.’

‘Yes, starting with you taking us out of the Commonwealth in 1987. If you had given me a bit more time I could have sorted things out. But you had to declare a republic and pardon that man, Rabuka. Now every rebel expects to be pardoned.’ Mara’s vapour flipped impatiently. ‘If you had stood firm and gone up to the barracks and spoken to the men you could have ended the 1987 coup there and then. You had the power.’

Ratu Penaia was a placid man in life and he wasn’t offended by Mara’s accusation. ‘I made a judgement call. I would not have been able to get through to Nabua. They would have stopped me. As to the pardon, that is what I was advised to do.’

‘Well it was wrong advice,’ snorted Mara.

By this time they had arrived over Taveuni and Ratu Penaia looked down on his island with nostalgia. His vapour swelled with pride and he was emboldened to
say to Mara, ‘If we are going to point fingers, let me ask, why did you run away from Government House in 2000? If you had stayed there the nation would have rallied around you and the army would have been able to take out Speight and his people. By leaving, you gave him a free hand.’

Ratu Mara ignored the comment for a time before exclaiming, ‘I had no choice. The army forced me out.’

‘Were you not the President—the Turaga? You could have refused.’

There was no response and they floated along the Taveuni coast. Eventually Ratu Mara said, ‘Look at how all this rich coconut land has gone back to bush. Do you realise that we used to produce 40,000 tons of copra a year? Now we are down to 8,000 tons. We should have done more to help the industry. Remember when I started the coir factory in Lakeba?’

‘It was a good idea,’ commented Ratu Penaia. As they passed over Somosomo, Ratu Penaia asked, ‘Why don’t we Fijians make better use of our land?’

‘Our tradition is to grow subsistence crops, not to engage in intensive agriculture. It may take another generation to change our way of thinking.’

A breeze carried them rapidly over to Labasa. They gazed down upon the vacant cane farms. ‘Look at this deplorable situation,’ Mara said. ‘I once had a cane farm in Seaqaqa. It was a model farm. Now it’s gone back to bush.’ He mused for a time before asking, ‘Whose bright idea was it to tell Fijians not to renew the leases?’

‘Our own Fijian leaders,’ responded Ratu Penaia. ‘You and I allowed this to happen,’ he added.

A strong northerly wind suddenly picked up the vapours and carried them across Bligh waters, over to Ovalau and Bau. As they arrived over this small historic island, other vapours rose to greet them. Ratu Sir George Cakobau was his usual cheery self. ‘Have you two come again to ask why we have not appointed a new Vunivalu?’

Ratu Penaia chuckled and said, ‘Maybe it’s because you were too much for your people. One Vunivalu like you was enough for 100 years!’

The other spirit, that of Ratu Sir Edward Cakobau, smirked and said, ‘The real reason is that men are afraid to anoint a woman.’

‘What the people now want is a strong leader,’ said Ratu Mara earnestly. ‘If the people of Bau could appoint a strong Vunivalu, he or she may be the one to lead Fiji out of its present misery.’
‘We put Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi in as Vice President and the army got rid of him,’ said Ratu George. ‘What more can we do?’

Ratu Mara’s vapour shuddered violently. ‘It’s up to the Bose Levu Vakaturaga [Council of Chiefs]. They are the voice of the Fijian people,’ he exclaimed.

‘But the army got rid of them,’

‘Yes, they walked away like sheep when Bainimarama pointed a gun at them,’ said Ratu Mara.

‘Well what do you expect them to do?’ asked Ratu Penaia.

Ratu Mara glared at the spirits around him for a time before saying, ‘The wisdom of the Fijian people collected over generations has been inherited by those chiefs who form the Bose Levu Vakaturaga. They have the responsibility to safeguard the interest of all our people, and this included people of other races, for they make up the citizens of our nation. We may have had a form of democracy here since 1970, but governments have come and gone. So have dictators like Rabuka, Speight and Bainimarama. Well, he hasn’t gone yet. The one constant has been the Bose. Now, in the hour of real need, they have wilted before a few guns. They must stand up and show courage. Your son was chairman once, Ratu Penaia. He made a good chairman. Why doesn’t he mobilise the chiefs instead of siding with the army?’

It was Ratu Edward who intervened. ‘The truth is, Ratu Mara, many chiefs have disgraced the Fijian people. There are too few of integrity, wisdom and courage whose motivation is service to the people. The back of the Bose Levu Vakaturaga has been broken.’

‘Then what hope is there?’ raged Ratu Mara.

The four spirits floated over Suva. They gazed down on the bustling city and observed the traffic jams, the potholed roads, the squatter areas, the unemployed people roaming the streets, the empty parliamentary complex, the crowded schools. They mused about what it was like during their lifetime.

‘What would Ratu Sukuna say if he were alive today?’ asked Ratu George as they floated over Boron House, where he had once lived.

They thought about it for a few moments. It was Ratu Mara who commented. ‘He had the difficult task of dealing with the colonial masters. I am sure that would have been a lot harder than coping with Bainimarama and his guns. One of his great achievements was to ensure that all of us had the proper training as leaders so that we could progress the nation towards independence. I think he would be of a similar mind today. Develop the leadership.’
Just then another vapour joined them and said, ‘The trouble with all of you and the leaders who are still living is that you, and they, have stopped thinking like Fijians. Everyone has gone global.’

The four vapours cringed before the dominant face of Ratu Sukuna’s spirit. ‘Do you understand what I mean?’ he asked. The four vapours shook their heads in denial.

‘What has made the Fijian people different are their values: vakaturaga—their behaviour; veidokai—their respect for others; vakarokoroko—their deference to others; and yalo malua—humility. It would seem that these characteristics have been abandoned as they seek to copy other people. If they continue to do so they will lose their identity.’

The vapours bowed in respect and were silent before Ratu Mara had the courage to respond. ‘Io saka, but the world has changed. You have to behave differently today in order to survive. Fiji is no longer a place for Fijians only. Many others live here and are just as equal.’

Ratu Sukuna’s vapour was impassive as he said, ‘If we forget who we are and change our way of life we are lost.’ With that he floated away.

The four vapours glided along the Viti Levu coast, past the many tourist resorts, until they arrived over Denarau. ‘Is this the way of the future?’ asked Ratu Mara.

Ratu Edward responded immediately. ‘It has to be. It’s the only industry that can provide investment, jobs and prosperity for our people. What is more, we have a fantastic product to offer the tourists.’

‘Not if we continue to have coups’ said Ratu George.

They gazed down on the tourist properties, at the many tourists having fun, at the happy and courteous staff, and the clear blue waters, shimmering beaches and colourful reefs. Ratu Penaia observed, ‘There can be few places as lovely as this anywhere else in the world.’

They were all silent as they floated over the Yasawas and continued to soak up the idyllic beauty of the islands. Ratu Mara exclaimed vehemently, ‘The army has to go or these coups will never end.’

Ratu Penaia, who was once an army man, said forcefully, ‘That will not happen. We will never have a government strong enough to remove the army.’

‘You know I have always been an admirer of the American system,’ said Ratu Edward. ‘A President elected by popular vote who then selects a cabinet from the best people available in the country. He could even select the army commander.’
Just then a thunderous black cloud appeared from the west. ‘There is a storm approaching,’ said Ratu George. ‘I think we had better get back to our bulu.’

‘Yes,’ said Ratu Mara, ‘and continue to exert our influence for the common good of all. You know most Fijians still believe in spirits like us. Don’t give up hope.’