Interlude: The Veli—Fiji’s Hairy Myth

We began the ascent of Mount Uluiqalau, Fiji’s second highest mountain from sea level. The 1,230 metre peak is the apex of the island of Taveuni. From the coast to the top, the climb is a steady 45-degree slope.

For the first 300 metres, we follow a rough horse track that threads its way through a coconut plantation. With little shade from the mop-headed coconut trees, the fierce tropical sun beats down upon us. It is a relief to reach the cool shade beneath the dense foliage of the giant hardwood trees which we encounter over the next 300 metres.

Wood pigeons coo as they flutter in the berry-laden trees, and parrots screech their warning of our passing. The ground is a mat of leaves quite free from shrubs, except for wild strawberries and delicate pink and white orchids.

There are no snakes, dangerous animals or insects in the forests of Taveuni, so we leisurely make our way up the slopes.

The terrain gradually changes as we climb the ridge that leads to the top. The trees become stunted. Streams flow out of deep gorges. Rocks make climbing difficult.

The higher we ascend the cooler it becomes. Clammy clouds shroud us in a chilly cloak. The tree trunks are slimy with moss.

The sounds of birds gives way to the never-ending dripping of water from leaves and our grunts of effort as we haul ourselves up a network of roots that form a ladder over the last 160 metres.

At the summit, we had hoped for a clear day and a glorious panoramic view of the coconut plantations on the distant flats, with the vivid colours of the surrounding reefs and the blue Pacific. We are to be disappointed, for when we struggle on to the foggy peak, visibility is no more than four metres. The binoculars I’ve carried with me are useless, so I hang them on a steel post marking the top of the island.

Our first task is to make camp for the night. This takes about half an hour to set up on a small relatively flat spot, some 50 metres along the ridge from the summit. We get a fire going before making our way back to the peak.

‘Hey, where are my binoculars?’ I ask when we reach the marker post. We search the ground and even check in our gear back at camp, but the binoculars have mysteriously disappeared. One of the Fijian guides says quietly, ‘Veli.’
'Veli?' I ask.

'The little people,' he says, indicating with his hand a height of about a metre.

'What are you talking about?'

He hesitates. 'Come back to the camp and I’ll tell you all about them,' he suggests.

Bursting with curiosity, we hurry back to the camp and huddle around the fire.

'Now, what’s all this nonsense?' I ask, somewhat aggressively.

Laisiasa stares at me for a few seconds as if trying to make up his mind what to tell me, no doubt wondering whether I’ll believe him. He then speaks earnestly.

'The Velis are very real people. I’ve seen one. Many old Fijians have seen them.' He hesitates.

'Tell me about them,' I urge.

'I once went out pig hunting,' he begins. 'I spent the night in the bush and just at dawn the dogs with me started to growl. I woke up and saw that the hackles on their backs were standing up straight. They cowered towards me, teeth bared, growling nervously. I peered out into the gloom and there, standing beside a tree, was a small man. He wasn’t wearing any clothes and was almost as hairy as a dog, with the hair on his head hanging to his waist, and eyes that glowed like fire. I was very frightened but knew from stories that my father had told me that this person was a Veli. When he saw me move, he turned and ran away, with the dogs after him. But they didn’t go far. They were too frightened.'

He tells me many more Veli stories that have been handed down by generations of Fijians and my interest is aroused to the point that I have to find out more about these fascinating ‘people.’

When I return home, I ask my father about the mysterious Veli. He is an old-timer, steeped in Fijian folklore, and readily confirms: ‘Oh yes, they exist alright. I once saw one in the garden. He was sitting in the old frangipani tree when I got up early one morning. He dropped down from the tree and scampered away like a monkey, long red hair trailing behind. The thing that struck me was the dreadful stench. Like a dog that had rolled in excreta. Incidentally, it’s said that if you catch a Veli, hold on to his hair, for its apparently sacred, and he will grant you any wish if you release him.’

Over the years I’ve spoken to many Fijians about these little people who are obviously quite harmless, and I am satisfied that some form of dwarf creature existed, and perhaps still exists in the jungles of Fiji. Stories about them abound throughout the islands from Serua to Cakaudrove, Kadavu to Bua.
In 1922, B. Brewster wrote in *Hill Tribes of Fiji*:

There may have been an Aboriginal population when the Melanesians arrived. The natives of my time used to maintain that the forests and waste spaces were still inhabited by a dwarf or pigmy people, visible only to the faithful. Handsome little folk with large fuzzy mops of hair, miniatures of what their own were like until they were cropped in deference to the sanitary requirements of the Wesleyan missionaries. These little sylvan people creatures were called Veli, and took the place of our own fairies. They loved the woods, the open grasslands and the sparkling brooks, and dwell in hollow trees, caves and dugouts. They had their own bananas, kava and other wild plants from which the varieties now in cultivation have been evolved. There is a beautiful fern called the Iri ni Veli, the fan of the fairies, so called from its resemblance to the fronds of the magnificent Prichardia Pacifica, from which are made the Viu or palm fans, one of the insignia of chiefly rank.

A theory has recently been advanced that our own fairies were the survivors of the cavemen and of the aboriginal race which then populated Britain, and our tales of them a dim recollection of the past. It may be too, that the Veli are also a misty memory of the former inhabitants of Viti. There is superstition always latent in the hill country called Luveni ni Wai, which rather prettily means ‘The Water babies.’ It existed in my time, and in the very last letters I received from my old district, I heard that it was still going on.

Another historian, Thomas Williams, writing in 1931 said:

A very old Fijian, native of Viti Levu, talks to me of these little gods, with as strong a faith in them as a Highlander has in fairies … ‘When residing near the Kauvadra, I often hear them sigh,’ said the old man, and his face brightened up as he proceeded: ‘They would assemble in troops on the tops of the mountains and dance and sing unwarily. They were little. I have often seen them and heard them sing.’

Then the well known naturalist Berthold Seemann, writing in 1862, commented:

In Kurudua’s dominion I could hardly turn without hearing of the doings of the Veli, and the greater part of the evening at this place was again devoted to them. My curiosity had already been so much excited that I determined, come what might, to write their natural history in the very localities most frequented by them.
By enquiry and frequent cross-examination, I found the Veli to be a class of spirits in figure approaching to the German gnome, in habits of life the fairy of England. They have been in the country from time immemorial, and live in hollow Kowrie-pines and Kabea-trees.

They are of diminutive size, and rather disproportionately larger about the upper part of their body. Their hair is thick, and prolonged behind in a pigtail. Some have wings, others have not.

Their complexion rather resembles that of the white race rather than the Fijian. They have great and pretty chiefs; are polygamists, and bear names like the Fijians. They also resemble the latter in wearing native cloth or tapa, which however is much finer and whiter than the ordinary sort.

They are friendly disposed and possess no other bad quality than that of stealing iron tools from the native. They sing sweetly, and occasionally gratify the Fijians by giving them a song.

They feed in the fruit of the Tankua (Ptyshosperma) and Boia (Scitaminearum gen.nov), which they term emphatically their cocoa-bit and their plantain: and men imprudent enough to cut these plants have received a sound beating from the enraged Veli.

They drink Kava made, not of the cultivated Macropiper methysticum, but of a pepper growing wild in the woods, and vernacularly called Yaqoyaqona (Macropiper perbelum, Benth.)

The Fijians have no long stories about them, as they have about their gods. All the accounts of the Veli relate to isolated facts—to their abode, their having been seen, heard to sing, caught in a theft and found to beat destroyers of their peculiar trees; but they are so numerous that it is no wonder the Fijians should consider the evidence sufficient to establish their real existence.

Their reference to the spiritual or god-like qualities is interesting as it has been said that Beqa firewalkers’ secret was handed down to them by the Veli. I was told that a party of Beqa firewalkers who were travelling overseas some time ago carried their Veli in a large suitcase, which the group’s priest insisted must be carried in the passenger cabin of the aircraft. No amount of persuasion could convince him that the case should go with the luggage or indeed be opened.

Up at Monasavu recently, three girls returning home late at night were astounded to see someone bathing under the village water pipe. A closer inspection revealed that the creature under the tap was a Veli.
A bulldozer driver in the same area was startled one evening, as he was completing his task at the edge of some dense jungle, to see a little fairy creature watching him from the concealment of the bush.

As recently as last year, a Suva taxi driver abandoned his taxi in reservoir Road when he saw what he thought was a Veli, sitting on the side of the road.

Last year at Tavua, school children chased what they thought was a Veli into a cane field, where he disappeared into a cave.

Fact or imagination? Myth or reality? Who is to say? But the stories persist and the old time Fijians treat them very seriously. One doesn’t mock the Veli story. It’s as much a part of Fijian folklore as the gnome of Germany and the fairy of Scotland.