

Preface

Ma`afu, born in Tonga about 1825, was a son of Aleamotu`a, Tu`i Kānokupolu and a cousin of Tupou I, king of Tonga. When aged in his early twenties, he came to live in Fiji and within 15 years established a power base to rival that of any indigenous chief. In 1865, a Wesleyan missionary visiting the island of Vanuabalavu paid a call on Ma`afu at his home in Lomaloma. The visitor was impressed:

This man, so knowing, so powerful and resolute, seems to be now throwing all his influence into the scale of good, as he before threw it into that of evil. He must be either a really changed man or a most finished hypocrite...¹

The missionary articulated a dilemma which had engaged the minds of many of his colleagues, and others who thought to put pen to paper, for more than 30 years. Was Ma`afu the force for good he often claimed to be, and indeed often seemed, or did he assume the cloak of justice only to further his boundless ambition and taste for discord and intrigue? Was he a beacon of hope for his people in Lau, or a cunning and ruthless autocrat bent only on the preservation of his power? Few who enjoyed the acquaintance of Ma`afu during the years before he was appointed as Tui Lau in 1869, and who recorded their thoughts for posterity, were able to reconcile these conflicting impressions.

In Fiji, Ma`afu pursued a career essentially uncompromised by moral ambiguities. Attracted to the islands by his ties of kinship with Lau and by the prospect of a freedom denied him in Tonga, Ma`afu established a unique position of power which rivalled that of any indigenous chief. The creation for him in 1869 of the title of Tui Lau was at once an innovation in the polity of Fiji and an acknowledgement of the power which he had established in the islands. Despite his importance in nineteenth century Fiji, Ma`afu's life has rarely received the attention from scholars which it merits. This neglect has left unresolved several questions concerning his career in his adopted home.

Most published works have given only passing attention to the reasons why Ma`afu left his home in 1847 to spend the rest of his days in Fiji. For a long time a view was expressed, based more on hearsay than a consideration of the available evidence, that Tupou I removed his young cousin from Tonga as a means of eliminating a dangerous rival for power. While modern scholarship has largely discredited this notion, there is need for a detailed consideration of the evidence to determine both the circumstances and the motive for his departure

1 [Unnamed] Wesleyan missionary to Stephen Rabone, 4 Jul 1865, *WMN(A)*, No. 38, Jan 1867, 601.

from Tonga. Similarly, his acquisition of sovereignty in the future chiefdom of Lau has never been acknowledged for what it was: a process legitimate in both established Fijian custom and English law. That sovereignty made possible his creation as Tui Lau and provided the basis for his future accession to power as Viceroy in the so-called Cakobau Government and, eventually, as Roko Tui Lau in the British Crown Colony of Fiji.

Ma`afu was sometimes seen, during his lifetime and since, as an agent of his king, Tupou I, in the latter's ambitions to influence and even, as often claimed, to conquer all or part of Fiji. While this question has been addressed by modern scholars, it will not suffer from a reassessment in the wider context of Ma`afu's career from his childhood in Tonga until his declining years in Lau. There is also the question of the nature and extent of his ambitions, a dilemma which engaged the attention of many of his contemporaries and which has been the subject of comment from scholars and other commentators ever since. The enigma that Ma`afu posed his missionary visitor in 1865 was never to be satisfactorily resolved in his lifetime. Because Ma`afu rarely gave voice to his ambitions, they remain elusive. A reassessment now of the life of Fiji's first Tui Lau can at least begin to determine whether he was indeed a force for good, or whether his perceived hypocrisy derived from a lust for power in which the *lotu* was just another force to be harnessed along the road to the mastery of Fiji.

This book had its beginnings in the doctoral thesis I wrote in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University, Canberra. When I began research, it was my intention to cover the whole of Ma`afu's life. That proved to be an elusive objective, since the University's suggested upper limit of 100,000 words for a doctoral thesis meant that I could not cover that life in the detail I considered appropriate. The thesis therefore concluded with Ma`afu's 1869 installation as Tui Lau. The present work carries the story to its conclusion, covering in particular Ma`afu's short and tumultuous career as Viceroy in the planter and settler oligarchy known as the Kingdom of Fiji and later, after Cession, as Roko Tui Lau, a post that enabled him to continue as ruler of Lau, albeit as a salaried official of the British colonial administration. In theory, as Roko Tui Lau, he was answerable to the Governor in Levuka. In practice, he continued his sometimes benevolent if always despotic sway over the islands of eastern Fiji.

The trail in search of Ma`afu has been a long and meandering one, with part of the way guided by the very few historians who have researched and published in nineteenth century Fijian history. I have also been led into many unexpected byways. Archival research has been conducted in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, the United Kingdom, Vanuatu and the United States. Numerous field trips, some financially supported by the Research School of Pacific and Asian

Studies and some privately funded, were made in eastern and southern Fiji as well as in Tonga. I record elsewhere my indebtedness and gratitude to numerous people and institutions.

The trail in fact began during a walk around Levuka on an overcast August morning in 1985. Reminders there of the nineteenth century European presence awakened an interest in the events of those years and particularly in the response of the Fijian people to the aliens in their midst. That interest led to reading, beginning with R.A. Derrick's *History of Fiji*. In this and other secondary works, one name stood out among all the Fijians, Tongans and Europeans: Ma`afu. He was ubiquitous, a man whose presence and importance could never be gainsaid as the chiefs and people of Fiji played out the dramas which would, eventually, lead to a precarious unity of the *matanitu* under foreign rule. Yet so little had been written about Ma`afu. Who was he, and whence did he come? What drove him rarely to leave centre stage in a country not his own? This work is a search for answers to many questions concerning the enigmatic Tongan chief who, for more than 30 years in Fiji, engaged the attention of all who crossed his path. He was a figure who could not be ignored, a man whose mark on the history of the islands of Fiji is greater than that of any of his contemporaries.

This work is concerned with Ma`afu's life from his birth in Tonga about 1825 until his death on Vanuabalavu on 6 February 1881. Any chronicle of the affairs of Fiji and more especially of the Tongan community in Lau, during Ma`afu's early years in those islands, must be subject to judgments still essentially alien and often unsympathetic. Some of the most important sources, the writings of the resident missionaries, are full of the minutiae of daily life, of the comings and goings of the Fijians and Tongans among whom they lived and of what the writers believed were the important issues of the day. They are also strongly influenced by the bourgeois, Christian and conservative values, the ideology of their nation, religion and class, in which the missionaries themselves had been nurtured. To quote Frank Welsh, a historian of South Africa, "the link between salvation, virtue, monogamy and trousers was universally acknowledged".² More often than not, chiefs and other persons of note are assessed according to their personal appearance and habits, their response to the Christian message and, in the case of chiefs, to the perceived nature of their authority. Wars and political manoeuvres are considered above all in the light of how they advance or hinder the *lotu*. Yet, for these middle years of the nineteenth century, among the remote islands of Lau and eastern Cakaudrove, the missionary sources are almost all we have. Visiting naval commanders, such as John Erskine of HMS *Havannah* or Charles Wilkes of the United States Exploring Expedition, can provide us, in the published accounts of their voyages, with impressions usually informative and often incisive. Such impressions, nevertheless, are suspended in

2 Frank Welsh, *A History of South Africa*, revised edition, London 2000, 108.

time and place. Our knowledge of the cast of characters and of the ebb and flow of events must emanate largely from the pens of the missionaries. Of the minds of their Fijian and Tongan hosts we can know very little, except when their words are reported in some missionary journal or letter. Often, such reporting is doubly filtered: people were inclined to circumspection in their discourse with missionaries, while the missionaries in turn were wont to exercise discretion in recording the words of others. Our pleasure in the richness and magnitude of missionary sources must ever be tempered by frustration at our inability to gain an indigenous perspective of both people and events.

Biography always risks becoming, in the words of Irish historian S.J. Connolly, an essentially fictive process: the organisation of selected traces of the past into a coherent narrative or analysis involves the creation of meanings and relationships that are not inherent in the materials themselves.³

To entertain the notion that it is possible to construct a true account of a person's life, whether that person be living or dead, is to entertain an illusion. "Evidence" of that life, whatever its nature and however profuse it might be, is always subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. Whatever rhetoric a biographer might adopt, he can never forget that his mission, conscious or otherwise, is to inform, to influence, to persuade and to please his readers. Any biography must be, in many if not most cases, a construction, rather than a reconstruction, of the subject's life. Aware, as I have tried to be, that I approach this study of the life of Ma`afu with my share of preconceptions, I can but acknowledge that my words cannot be free of bias and error. No biographer can claim otherwise. To describe Ma`afu's life is to construct a narrative that cannot, in at least some aspects, accurately reflect the life itself.

I have presented elsewhere a more detailed discussion of the particular difficulties involved in writing a biography of Ma`afu.⁴ He spent his formative years in Tonga, then a non-literate society undergoing unprecedented and sometimes violent change. He was to attain power as a great chief in Fiji, a society where, like Tonga, the past was enshrined in rich oral traditions, although the various alien visitors, colonial administrators as well as missionaries and naval captains, would increasingly chronicle many aspects of his turbulent career. Finally, during the last 12 years of Ma`afu's life, firstly as Tui Lau and then as a salaried official of the British colonial administration, he came under often intense scrutiny from many documented sources, including newspapers, which greatly enhance our knowledge of his public and private lives and even, if only rarely, the inner workings of his mind. Ma`afu's life encompassed a period when

3 S.J. Connolly, *Contested Island: Ireland 1460-1630*, Oxford 2007, 2.

4 John Spurway, "An indigenous perspective: inside the mind of Ma`afu", *Pacific Lives, Pacific Places*, ed. by Peter Hemenstall, Canberra 2002, 54-69.

the ancient Pacific, already known to Europeans, passed into a new phase of existence, a time when the islands' fortunes, especially including those of Tonga and Fiji, were determined by the interests and ambitions of Great Britain and other powers that concerned themselves with the world's largest expanse of ocean. Since almost all the documented sources on which I have drawn for this work were compiled from a European perspective, it is inevitable that the biases and opinions of the time have influenced some of the conclusions I have drawn.

My purpose has nevertheless been to relate Ma`afu's story. It is not well known, especially in his homeland, while in Fiji it has become overlaid with the myth that always enshrouds the powerful. By the time of the Cession of Fiji to Britain, Ma`afu had become the most powerful chief in the islands. He was also, with reason, the most feared and distrusted, at least among the indigenous chiefs. Today, the Fijian people's knowledge of the first Tui Lau and his times is hampered, not only by the enshrouding myth, but also and especially by the inadequate attention given to the history and prehistory of their islands in the Fijian school curricula. To understand and to be proud of their past, Fijians must first come to know that past. If this book can open even a small window into their history, I will be content.

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Exeter, Devon, England, December 2014

This text taken from *Ma`afu, prince of Tonga, chief of Fiji: The life and times of Fiji's first Tui Lau*, by John Spurway, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.