CHAPTER FIVE

Leadership with Limitations:
Constrained Leadership for Indo-Fijian and Fijian Methodists in the 1930s

The impetus for establishing a self-governing church forced the Methodist mission’s leadership to continually re-evaluate their views of Fijian and Indo-Fijian abilities and capacity for self-rule, yet the obstacles that the mission still placed in the path of non-European leaders were starting to cause friction.1 Within a global context of growing anti-colonial discontent, the delegates of the International Missionary Council (IMC), who came from all of the far-flung corners of the globe, were similarly responding to anti-colonial movements. The ideas circulating at their conferences and in their publications had already inspired a reflexive approach and the acculturation of Christianity in Fiji. These were increasingly necessary as non-European church members voiced their dissatisfaction with their exclusion from positions of authority. This chapter focuses on the missionaries’ efforts to come to grips with their identity as colonisers and to respond to the antagonism that was building against them. It follows the careers of key figures — both Indo-Fijian and Fijian — who were stepping into leadership roles and challenging European hegemony. It also follows the means devised used by European missionaries to respond to these challenges. Some followed the IMC’s directions to ensure self-support, self-government and self-propagation. Following the ideas of the General Secretary of Methodist Foreign Missions, the Reverend John W Burton,

we can trace the discourses circulating about ‘native’ governance throughout the 1930s. While Burton’s writings offer a gauge of the racialist thinking that existed within Fiji’s Methodist mission, the actions of indigenous Methodists spoke in equal volume and projected back on to these colonial structures. Burton discussed the ‘three selves’ concept at length, but in practice it was manipulated to make sure that European hegemony remained intact.² What the missionaries viewed as humanitarian efforts to address the cultural needs of Fijian and Indo-Fijian peoples were identified by non-European ministers as the institution of racialised barriers.

To illustrate the reinforcement of European hegemony through habitual colonial exclusion, this chapter presents snapshots in the careers of two of the mission’s workers, with case studies of the Reverend Aseri Robarobalevu, who was appointed as assistant superintendent of Bua Circuit in 1930, and Ramsey Deoki, who became the first Indo-Fijian minister when he was ordained in 1939. While focusing on critical moments of tension, these case studies demonstrate the extent of ethnicised exclusion practised within the mission, which crystallised and became most visible at times when they were challenged.³ These events are then positioned within the context of the continuing discussions between missionaries — particularly the chairmen, Richard McDonald and Charles O Lelean — and John W Burton during this decade. As Mamdani identified in his studies of governance under indirect rule, missionaries were responding to difference and this, in turn, coaxed their establishment of a racially segregated organisation. Distinctions between communities were not only racial, but hierarchies were also established between and within them. Each branch had unique challenges due to their segregation from one another and the different processes and paces of acculturation in each, but there were commonalities in the ways that missionaries simultaneously exacerbated the differences between peoples while trying to understate, in their rhetoric, the racial nature of the Methodist mission. At the same time, non-European ministers were increasingly articulating their dissatisfaction with the inequity of the mission’s structure. This chapter reveals both the structural inequities embedded within the mission while showing the ways in which they were starting to fracture.

In 1930, the effects of the Wall Street Crash hit Fiji hard, leading to a rise in unemployment and downturn in business. Missionaries Lewis Barnard and L I Linggood were retrenched after only a few months in the colony. Barnard had been stationed at Bua Circuit and, loath to leave this important station unattended, the synod decided that it was the right time to try a system of self-governance, which was to commence on 1 November 1930. Until this point, only European missionaries had been appointed as circuit superintendents, charged with overseeing the payment of ministers’ wages and distributing discipline when it was deemed necessary, so the decision to employ a talatala (Fijian minister) as superintendent was groundbreaking. The mission had a policy of paying talatala considerably less than European missionaries, so the replacement of European missionaries with a talatala would ease financial pressure. As discussed in Chapter Two, the mission had instituted a hierarchy in their wage scheme, which was allocated according to race. In 1919, stipends were increased, with European missionaries paid £230 per annum, but the wage hierarchy was still intact in 1930.

The synod sought a talatala ‘of outstanding ability and worth’ to assume the position of ‘Assistant of the Superintendent missionary’, a title that flagged the hesitation Europeans felt about admitting talatala to this position of prestige and responsibility. The synod nominated Aseri Robarobalevu, the son of a minister and not of notable chiefly rank, to the position. Robarobalevu was described as ‘one of the outstanding men in the native ministry’, ‘of choice gifts and ability’, with ‘commendable zeal and patience’. Filling Barnard’s position, Robarobalevu was to minister the Nabouwalu congregation, including government officials, two boys’ schools, and a hospital. He was also to train teachers and pastors at the local training institution, where between 20 and

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4 ‘The Innocents Abroad: “Sorry to stow away”: Some Sidetlights on Suva’, Western Mail, Perth, 14 August 1930, p. 16.
8 Report, Commission to Fiji 1907, CY3465, MOM 238, ML.
9 Annual Synod, 20 October 1919, Annual Synod Minutes and Journals, 1854–1945, together with Miscellaneous Correspondence, 1869–1899, Methodist Church of Fiji, PMB 1138, reel 2, p. 474.
10 ‘Particulars of the first native minister appointed to a circuit in Fiji formerly worked by a European missionary’, F/1/1930, NAF; A Thornley, personal communication, 18 March 2013.
30 students studied at any one time, and oversee other talatala, travelling regularly throughout the circuit.\textsuperscript{12} McDonald reported to Robarobalevu’s benefactor, Robert Smith:\textsuperscript{13}

He has a difficult task and the eyes of Fiji are on him. Should he succeed, then having shown what the present-day Fijian can do, the way is open for others to similar stations, so we shall gradually reach the goal of a self-dependent, self-propagating, indigenous church in Fiji.\textsuperscript{14}

The Reverend R A Gibbons inducted Robarobalevu to his new elevated office.\textsuperscript{15} When the two men arrived at Bua, they were greeted with a ceremony held in Robarobalevu’s honour. Gibbons made a speech, declaring this an ‘epoch in the history of the Methodist Church of Fiji’.\textsuperscript{16} Chiefs and talatala based in Bua also expressed ‘gratitude and pride, professing their faith in Robarobalevu’.\textsuperscript{17} According to Gibbons, there was overwhelming enthusiasm in the community for the new appointment. Gibbons described Robarobalevu as being overjoyed and comforted by the words of his colleagues and ‘the assurances of loyalty’, knowing the weight of his responsibility.\textsuperscript{18} Ministers from the eastern islands had requested greater involvement in higher levels of the mission throughout the previous 95 years and it was finally coming to fruition.\textsuperscript{19} However, it quickly became evident that Robarobalevu would not share the symbolic markers of status afforded their European colleagues.

The anxiety about talatala ability to manage finances was evident from the outset, with special arrangements made to minimise Robarobalevu’s involvement in taking care of mission money. While Robarobalevu would be appointed to the circuit, he would be paid a lower rate than European superintendents, with money drawn from the balance of missionary contributions and circuit grants held in each circuit’s funds. He would not be responsible for circuit finances, with the circuit’s funds to be held in reserve. Synod would take responsibility for its expenditure.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{12} ‘Particulars of the first native minister appointed to a circuit in Fiji formerly worked by a European missionary’, F/1/1930, NAF.
\textsuperscript{13} A Thornley, personal communication, 18 March 2013.
\textsuperscript{14} ‘Particulars of the first native minister appointed to a circuit in Fiji formerly worked by a European missionary’, F/1/1930, NAF.
\textsuperscript{15} Gibbons to McDonald, 22 July 1930, F/1/1930, NAF.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} District meeting minutes, 1929, CY3040, ML.
LEADERSHIP WITH LIMITATIONS

Figure 5: ‘Native Ministers, Nabouwalu, Welcome to Us’.
Source: Reverend Lewis Barnard, ‘Reports and photographs from the Methodist Mission in Fiji’, PMB MS 1325. Published with permission of Koraline Killeen.

Figure 6: Inside of mission house, Nabouwalu.
Source: ‘Welcome to Us’, Reverend Lewis Barnard, ‘Reports and photographs from the Methodist Mission in Fiji’, PMB MS 1325. Published with permission of Koraline Killeen.
European superintendents typically resided in mission houses in relatively central locations within their designated circuit. This house, often referred to as ‘the compound’, acted as a base from which to travel and visit congregations.21 The Reverend Robert H Green, stationed on Bau throughout the late 1930s, wrote that only European missionaries and chiefs were allowed to enter the compound through the front gate, ‘while commoners climbed the rough back track up the elevated end of the island’.22 If a commoner used the gate, their church membership was suspended for three months.23 There were thus both racial and class boundaries, exemplified by who could or could not enter mission compounds, dictated who could and could not inhabit certain spaces, and how access to these spaces would be gained.

Robarobalevu, who was not European or of chiefly background, would have to go against similar protocol to enter the property at Bua. Fijians were generally excluded from the mission quarters except when invited or when working as domestic labour.24 In both branches of the Fiji Methodist mission, non-European

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22 R H Green, My Story: A Record of the Life and Work of Robert H Green, Melbourne, 1978, p. 188.
23 Ibid.
people were employed for domestic work. Missionaries working in the Indo-Fijian mission had wages for domestic labourers incorporated into their pay. This was not a cost incorporated into the wage for non-European ministers — they were expected to do the cleaning themselves or have another type of arrangement. According to the Reverend Robert Green, people on Bau had believed that a European could not ‘soil his hands with manual or dirty work’. More aptly, historian David Hilliard’s work on the Anglican Melanesian mission depicted the typical 1930s mission residence as ‘a self-conscious European outpost, with house-girls, schoolboy servants and a closely observed routine for work and leisure, to which Melanesians were rarely admitted as equals’. Colonial identity was crafted thusly in mission houses.

Robarobalevu had to negotiate the changes to this essentialised hierarchy at Bua. He was not invited to live in the mission house at Nabouwalu. This surprised the local chiefs and talatala. Gibbons relayed their reaction to McDonald and requested that Robarobalevu be allowed into the compound, unless the mission wanted a battle on their hands. The earlier euphoria about what seemed like progress towards indigenous governance dissipated when the barriers to equality were realised. While willing to concede the circuit to Robarobalevu’s oversight, domestic spaces remained a symbol of European status and privilege that needed to be redefined, spaces that continued to define racial difference, status and prestige. This case study illuminates a moment in which missionaries’ visions of mission homes as exemplary models of domesticity and ministry were unsettled. By not allowing Robarobalevu to live in the mission house, missionaries enacted a social convention of exclusion and colonial culture, which highlighted the disparity between the mission’s policy for devolution

26  Ibid., p. 188.
and its imperial tendencies. This was similar to exclusionary practices enacted in other colonies throughout the world, which had become part of the protocols of colonialism, a defining feature of the lifestyles of expatriate communities.31

Chiefs were important in the renegotiation of the mission’s spaces, with the chiefs at Bua pressuring Gibbons to make a complaint. McDonald had been relieved to hear from a chief who was an assistant district commissioner based in Nabouwalu, where Robarobalevu was working. This ‘young chief’ was in Suva, and he spoke highly of Robarobalevu’s work and influence.32 Consultation with chiefs was still highly valued, despite the lack of chiefs in the ministry, with the mission’s chairman consulting privately with chiefs whenever possible. Chiefs acted as intermediaries between the colonial administration, the mission, and the villages. In this instance, chiefs provided support for their talatala in ensuring that he was not disadvantaged.

Sufficient evidence is not at hand regarding the outcome of the dispute over access to the mission compound. It was never discussed in the mission’s synods. However, there are hints that there were changes made after this incident. The Reverend Robert Green believed it took ‘more than a century to quite remove this class distinction that crept into the standing of a missionary, a chief or a European’.33 Non-European ministers, both Fijian and Indo-Fijian, were all theoretically allowed to move into mission compounds as they became superintendents in the 1940s, yet the Reverend Harold Bock was reluctant to have a talatala stay in the mission house at Nailaga, Ba, while he was absent.34 While it was unclear how this system unravelled, there were certainly still examples of missionaries having indigenous domestic workers clean their homes in the late 1940s.35 Robarobalevu’s appointment was a significant step in moving talatala toward a more equal footing with their European counterparts and allowing them greater access to mission spaces.

Despite Gibbons’ correspondence in 1930 suggesting that Robarobalevu was receiving considerable support from the chiefs at Bua, he clung to essentialist ideas about the relationship between chiefs and commoners, arguing in his report that year that the chiefly system hindered the ‘native ministry’:

32 R L McDonald to R Smith, 25 September 1930, F/1/1930, NAF.
33 R H Green, My Story: A Record of the Life and Work of Robert H Green, Melbourne, 1978, p. 188.
34 H Bock to W Green, 2 January 1943, F/1/1944, NAF.
Though the power of the Fijian chief is diminishing today, he is still an important power in Fijian Society to be reckoned with. However able and reliable a native minister may be, he must respect and carry out the wishes of the chief and all Fijian chiefs are not enlightened nor are they all good men. To antagonise the chief may be to alienate his people also. Hence the difficulty of appointing a native minister to an office in which he must exercise spiritual and moral authority. It is difficult for a Fijian to take care of money even sacred Church monies. A native finds it difficult to refuse a ‘kerekere’ (a request) made by a chief or a friend.\textsuperscript{36}

Gibbons’ comment highlighted again the issue of financial responsibility and the implications of kerekere — of having to share their income with their families — for the Methodist community. The responsibilities to their families, chiefs and villages weighed heavily on talatala, and made budgeting difficult. When it was a question of chief or church, the chief often won out.

Gibbons’ concerns came from what he had witnessed while working in Fiji. These were real concerns about the continuation of cultural practices. He voiced these at the same time as Indo-Fijian and Fijian Methodists, such as Robarobalevu, gained support from their communities to combat the colonial culture within the mission. Anti-colonial feeling was fed by concurrent discussions held within the colony about political representation for Indo-Fijians in the Fijian legislative assembly.\textsuperscript{37} European missionaries clung to the symbols of their prestige, their authority being too entrenched to simply vanish in an instant. Their concerns about the real difficulties in transitioning to self-governance were muffled as a result. Racialist thinking ran alongside missionaries’ concern about culture, and both were used to maintain their control. Yet the racialist nature of the mission’s systems and the infantilising discourse employed by missionaries increasingly irritated non-European ministers, who were developing their own race consciousness.\textsuperscript{38}

The political atmosphere demanded increased responsibility for non-European peoples in all colonial institutions, and the mission used the colonial administration as a benchmark for its own progress, as Fijian roles within the colonial administration were changing at the same time. Ratu Sukuna, who was educated at Oxford, was the only indigenous Fijian in the upper echelons of Fiji’s colonial administration by 1930, despite the administration’s efforts to

\textsuperscript{36} R A Gibbons, 1930 Macuata-Bua circuit report, F/6/1926/31, DD/38.
increase Fijian leadership. McDonald argued that the mission should also move slowly, as it would be difficult to retract autonomy ‘once bestowed’, and so they had better ‘make no mistake when finally we relinquish the reins of authority’. McDonald continued to find ways to ‘indigenise’ the mission that did not necessitate handing power to his indigenous colleagues, which meant that he still appeared to be working towards the ‘three selves’ church policy. As mentioned in Chapter Three, McDonald was interested in the process of embedding the church within the chiefly system by having the institution’s structure mirror that of the chiefly society. This meant, ultimately, that there would be strong leadership from the top. According to McDonald’s 1931 District Report, this did not require significant change to the existing mission structure. Even though he thought a British-styled Methodist structure had been implanted into Fiji, he believed that it was a ‘natural’ extension of the Fijian governance system, with the ‘head station at the chiefly centre and the subordinate and dependent sections either clustered round in island groups or stringing away along the coasts or following the waterways to the hill districts’. Villages in the hills of Fiji were dependent on chiefly centres to make decisions: ‘They are the weaker members of the tribe … and they are financially dependent.’ He believed that ‘the system of self-support must be laid down along the lines that fit in with the conditions of life and the people’. McDonald then described the mission circuit in a similar fashion. Its outlying stations were dependent on superintendents, who were in turn dependent on the chairman in Suva. The parallels between the mission and the chiefly social structure meant that Methodism was already, in a way, indigenised — it was installed in a pattern familiar to Fijian culture.

The processes of indigenisation and the ‘three selves’ church concept were central to mission thinking during this period of heightened political awareness around race. Racial exclusivity was a crucial point of contest in the Indo-Fijian branch during the 1930s. Ramsey Deoki, who we met in the previous chapter, had been back in Fiji for three years by 1932, fully trained in Australia for missionary duties, but still not ordained. The mission was faced with the question of where to train Indo-Fijian catechists for ordination, if they were not allowed to attend the Davuilevu theological school. In 1933, the synod finally responded to requests to open ministerial training to Indo-Fijians. Shortly afterwards, three-year courses for Indo-Fijian theological students commenced; students would follow the course with a year as circuit assistants and culminate in a four-

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
year probation period before ordination. While the path to ordination became clearer for Deoki, he started to wonder how his career would look if he were not to be allocated the same degree of authority or pay as his European colleagues.

Figure 8: ‘Esau’s/Native Minister’s house’, Nabouwalu.
Source: Reverend Lewis Barnard, ‘Reports and photographs from the Methodist Mission in Fiji’, PMB MS 1325. Published with permission of Koraline Killeen.

Signs of Deoki’s discontent were obvious when he turned his back on the Methodist mission and joined the Gospel Hall resistance movement that had emerged in Levuka. The Gospel Hall united Indo-Fijians from several Christian denominations who were disaffected with the existing mission. Mr Sperber, described by Burton as a ‘religious wanderer’, assisted its members. In January 1934, Indo-Fijian Methodists who had attended the Toorak Methodist Church in Suva left to join the Gospel Hall movement and push for self-representation. They may have been attracted to the Gospel Hall because of its rousing hymns, clarity through fundamentalism, or family connections, but it was also clear that they did so primarily because they were frustrated with the Methodist mission’s racialist nature, and their frustration was developing into an articulation of anti-colonial feeling. While the Gospel Hall movement was at its height, so too was agitation from Indo-Fijian leaders who wanted self-representation in the

44 R H Green, ‘Fiji Synod 1933’, The Spectator, 11 April 1934, p. 301.
45 J W Burton, diary, Visit to Fiji, 11 May 1933, MLMSS 2899 Add On 990, ML.
Legislative Assembly. The Toorak congregation signed a petition demanding to be represented by Indo-Fijian rather than European missionaries, an explicit request for self-representation. That year, despite there being 11 European missionaries and four Indo-Fijian representatives in synod, Europeans still held all the superintendent positions and maintained power in the Indo-Fijian branch. At the very least, Indo-Fijian Methodists in the Gospel Hall movement wanted an Indo-Fijian ministry, with equal numbers of Indo-Fijian and European members in the Indo-Fijian synod. Burton initially dismissed the request. The Reverend W Rex Steadman, leader of the Indo-Fijian branch, was frustrated. He had spoken with numerous members of the movement — Taluri Yohan, Phulkuar, Ram Padarath, and Ishwari Prasad, who was then severely ill — and they had all urged him to speak with Deoki who, discouraged by Burton’s response, had remained with the Gospel Hall movement. Steadman reported: ‘Ishwari has recently been a strong advocate of reunion … Ishwari begged me to see Ramsey [Deoki], and said he thought the present position revealed a God-given opportunity for reconciliation.’ Steadman sympathised with Deoki’s demands. He wrote to Burton:

The delay in finding an appointment for Ramsey is to them a notable example of our reluctance to appoint Indian preachers to the work. Among ourselves as European members of the staff we maintain that it was financial considerations that prevented an appointment for Ramsey as a preacher, but we have not been able to convince our Indian brethren on this point.

Members of the ‘Indo-Fijian branch’ rallied in Deoki’s defence, unhappy with the limitations imposed upon him and his elevation in the ministry. Burton was intent on downplaying race as an issue, but this grew increasingly difficult as the Gospel Hall members put forward their case.


49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., pp. 1, 3.
Figure 9: ‘Mr and Mrs Deoki’.
Source: Photo by R H Rickard and others for the Methodist Church of Australasia, Department of Overseas Missions, ‘Series 01: Photographic prints of missionaries and Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa and India, ca 1885–1938’, PXA 1137, 490-535, pic acc 7061, neg 21, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Published with permission of Uniting Church of Australia.
In June 1934, the Gospel Hall movement again articulated requests for Indo-Fijian representation. South Australian missionary Arthur H Blacket had recently commenced work in the Indo-Fijian mission in 1933 after spending three years at the Methodist mission in Azamgarh, India. He claimed that no one had wanted theological training, but he felt that:

one of the surest ways to happiness and efficient service in the Indian church is the training of its own ministers here. The great barrier in the way of advance is distrust, and it is only as the future leaders of the Church work and study closely with us that they will gain our confidence, and we theirs.

Building trust was going to be a long and arduous process, and Steadman heeded the advice from other Indo-Fijian Methodists that Deoki would be the key to reconciliation. He maintained in August that Deoki was the ‘pioneer of our locally trained ministry in Fiji’, a man of ‘patience and restraint’ who had won the confidence of the congregation. He was a ‘good preacher both in English and Hindi’, and ‘very keen and industrious in his work’. His beliefs were described as ‘fundamentalist’, which was in line with the Gospel Hall’s principles, but he was still receptive to a breadth of opinion. Steadman considered Deoki ‘the most promising man that has appeared so far in the history of our work here’. While Steadman tried to smooth the situation, Burton exacerbated tensions, making it clear that racial parameters would be applied if Deoki offered for ordination. Burton wrote to McDonald: ‘If Ramsey [Deoki] offers as a candidate for the ministry he offers for the ministry in Fiji just as the Fijian minister does … His salary too will be fixed on the basis of an Indian minister.’ Burton warned that a racially determined pay scale would remain in place: Europeans would continue to receive one rate of pay, Fijians another, and Indo-Fijians another rate again.

One of the main points discussed by Burton, McDonald, Deoki and Steadman was Deoki’s efforts to be treated as equal to his European colleagues. Deoki had made it clear that he was not happy with the lack of opportunity afforded to him in Fiji. Since 1930, Deoki had wondered whether he would have to return to Australia for further education in order to obtain equal status with European

51 W R Steadman to J W Burton, 7 June 1934, Fiji 1934 folder, MOM 524, p. 4.
53 A Blacket to J W Burton, 18 June 1934, Fiji 1934 folder, MOM 524.
54 W R Steadman quoted in letter from J W Burton to R McDonald, 17 August 1934, Fiji 1934 folder, MOM 524, ML, p. 2.
55 Ibid., p. 1.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., p. 2.
58 J W Burton to R L McDonald, 17 August 1934, Fiji, 1934, MOM 524, ML, p. 2.
missionaries.59 By October 1934, Burton had made it clear that Deoki’s ordination would not secure his equality with his European colleagues in Fiji or Australia. He elaborated on this point by discussing the various potential developments that might occur if Deoki were to seek work elsewhere. Australia’s immigration policy would make it difficult for Deoki to move there, so Burton suggested that he look to New Zealand where he might have more opportunities. Burton elaborated:

We could not imagine Ramsey with his wife and Indian children being settled in any of our [Australian] circuits, and in any case the Immigration act would make it impossible, and the best we could do would be to get a permit to reside in Australia from year to year for educational purposes.60

Burton suggested that Deoki follow in the footsteps of the Reverend Raymond Dudley, who had been taken by Hannah Dudley and raised in New Zealand, where he undertook theological training.61 Despite receiving the same training as his Australian colleagues, the mission board in Sydney felt that ‘there was not the slightest hope of Ramsey being accepted as a candidate on the same basis as a candidate in Australia, that is, having the right to a circuit in New South Wales and all other particular privileges of a minister here in this stage’.62 The ‘White Australia’ policy shaped Burton’s response to Deoki — a reality over which neither Burton nor Deoki had any control. Yet it was evident that the national immigration policy equated with Burton’s own racial thinking. Burton compared Deoki with Raymond Dudley.63 Burton wrote: ‘Raymond Dudley is an Indian only by birth, and by education and association is an Englishman. This cannot be said of Ramsey.’64 Burton’s comparison between Dudley and Deoki revealed the distinction he drew between culture and race. In Burton’s thinking, a person raised within European culture could pass as a European, despite being born an ‘Indian’. Christianity, from Burton’s perspective, was not a prerequisite for acceptance, and race trumped any evidence of cultural change. Burton’s ideas about race and culture, shaped by his experience of Australian politics and policies, his knowledge of anthropology, and his time in Fiji, influenced the Methodist mission board’s approach to the challenges in the Indo-Fijian branch.

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60  J W Burton to R L McDonald 16 October 1934, Fiji 1934 folder, MOM 524, ML, p. 1.
64  J W Burton to R L McDonald 16 October 1934, Fiji 1934 folder, MOM 524, ML, p. 2.
Despite Burton’s opinion, the synod accepted Deoki as one of the two first Indo-Fijian candidates to stand for the ministry in 1934. The other candidate was George Prakash. The synod attendees declared that Deoki’s candidacy marked ‘the Indianisation of our church in Fiji’, a step towards awarding ‘a greater share in the Government and development of the church’ with Indo-Fijian adherents. Prakash later withdrew his candidacy, leaving Deoki to forge this new path in the ministry alone. It was not considered necessary for him to go through the entire theological training at Davuilevu, and he went in to his probation straight away under the guidance of the Reverend W Rex Steadman at Lautoka, who was still the head of the Indo-Fijian branch. This was the same style of training provided to catechists in the Indian mission at Azamgarh. Steadman and Deoki discussed the racial issues at length, with Steadman reporting to McDonald by November that Deoki disliked ‘the distinctions in the ranks of our ministry made merely on racial grounds’, that they were ‘undesirable and unfair … they should have equal standing and status with other ministers in the church’. Steadman also corresponded with Burton on this point, but to no avail — the status of Indo-Fijian mission workers was fixed for the time being.

During the early 1930s, Burton’s approach was increasingly informed by the work of Adolphus Peter Elkin, an ordained Anglican priest who by 1934 was employed as an anthropologist by the University of Sydney. Burton met Elkin at various missionary conferences and through their work on the National Missionary Council. Elkin published widely on matters relating to Australia and the Pacific on the cultural change in indigenous communities that had resulted from colonialism. Elkin’s publications had influenced mission policies in the Pacific, and his theories did not require a great shift in Burton’s thinking — both presented cultural change as part of progressive social evolution. In Australia, Elkin suggested that ‘civilising agents’ such as missionaries were

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65 District meeting minutes, 1934, Shot 48, MOM 202, CY 3045, ML, p. 35
69 W R Steadman to R L McDonald, 26 November 1934, F/1/1934, NAF.
to ‘preserve and modify or supplant the aboriginal view of life and the rites and practices arising from it, that primitive man may still feel at home in the universe’. Burton used Elkin’s studies to think through the anti-colonialism in the Pacific. This was evident in a speech he made in 1935, as questions about the inclusion of Indo-Fijians in the Legislative Assembly were debated at length in Fiji’s colonial administration:

The growth of nationalism, with its eager cries of ‘Fiji for the Fijians’, ‘India for the Indians’, had brought with it a reaction against European control. This should be met, not with a dominating, masterful spirit, but on lines of human brotherhood and comradeship. The ideal to be striven for was an indigenous church, self-propagating, self-supporting, self-governing. The missionary motive, although ever the same, must express itself in ways to meet today’s needs.

This speech signalled a considerable shift in Burton’s thinking. He had moved from a belief in the need to have European missionaries in the field to oversee and guide non-European peoples through social change, to a position that encouraged a more equitable relationship between European missionaries and ‘native’ ministers. The messages of discontent from the mission field likely pushed Burton to question the paternalism of earlier decades. Burton was reconsidering his approach to the ‘three selves’ church model, but his interpretation of what ‘today’s needs’ were and how indigenous people might be prepared for them still centred on industrial education. He hoped to ensure that non-European peoples were ‘fit’ for the ‘oncoming of civilisation’. If missionaries were to protect indigenous peoples from the evils of civilisation, they had to teach ‘natives to be peasant proprietors in their own right, to use to the best advantage the tools which were obtainable in their own villages’.

The tensions that surrounded discourses of labour and land were also addressed at the Davuilevu theological school. With Indo-Fijian catechists now able to enrol at Davuilevu, changes were made to the theological curriculum to incorporate church history and contemporary religion, the latter including Hinduism and Islam. The idea was to make education more inclusive for all attendees. A H Blacket taught this subject when Robert Green was principal, believing that increased understanding and awareness of other religions would ‘help lessen the pressures that were growing between the races as the Indians

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73 A P Elkin, ‘Civilised Aborigines and Native Culture’, *Oceania*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1935, p. 145.
77 Ibid.
were already showing signs of becoming the dominant race in Fiji’, which Green referred to as an ‘alien intrusion’.78 ‘We brought these wide awake Asians to the Pacific’, he quipped, ‘who through suffering have won through to success’.79

Despite the persisting racial system, Deoki returned to work in the mission and was given increasing levels of responsibility. By 1937 he was working in the Penang circuit of the Indo-Fijian branch, at Rakiraki. He answered directly to the mission’s chairman in a similar fashion to his European colleagues who were appointed as superintendents.80 In 1938 he was paid £180 per annum, and was permitted to employ Ishwari Prasad, an Indo-Fijian catechist, as a supernumerary for £2 per week.81 He was slowly receiving greater responsibility and financial reward for his work.82 In 1939, as the decade drew to a close, celebrations were organised for his ordination. It was a monumental accomplishment after a drawn-out battle for equal training and status.

While it seemed that the Fijian membership had more opportunities for leadership than the Indo-Fijian Methodists, the Reverend Charles Oswald Lelean, who in 1939 was acting chairman as McDonald had left the mission field, reflected pessimistically on the process of installing Fijian ministers to superintendent posts. A self-proclaimed ‘conservative die-hard’, Lelean was dubious about implementing circuit independence, citing financial matters as the principal problem that would delay the transition to self-support. When Fijian self-support had been trialled previously, he said that talatala had starved: ‘a pitiable story which I suppose will never be told’.83 He had been making the argument that laymen would struggle to manage circuit finances for 30 years, and believed that making circuits self-supporting would result in the ‘misappropriation of church funds’.84 He wrote:

I am not mentioning this by way of disparaging the moral character of the Fijian. We must make every allowance for his psychological peculiarities. But we must accept the fact of his lack of financial exactness. Even the average Native Minister today is incapable of managing the finances of his section.85

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79 Ibid.
80 Minutes District Meeting, 1937, CY3286, MOM 270, ML.
81 Prasad died in 1940. The obituary in the mission’s minutes said that he was born in Sanjaharpur, Uttar Pradesh, India, in 1871. His parents had been Christian, and he was speaking at revivals by the age of 18. He went to Bareilly College and was head catechist at CMS Calcutta during his 20s, before working at the Methodist mission at Azamgarh. In 1913 he had offered for work in Fiji. Indian ministerial session 1938, PMB 1138, reel 2, p. 1.
82 Ibid.
83 C O Lelean to J W Burton, 19 July 1939, Fiji district correspondence regarding constitution, MOM 386, ML.
84 Ibid., p. 3.
85 Ibid.
Charles Lelean believed that the mission needed a ‘better type of Native Minister’, equal or superior to Fijian teachers and government administrators.\(^{86}\) However, in an institution where class and prestige mattered, Charles Lelean wondered what relationship a superior minister would have with his European colleagues or the ‘older type’ of talatala, and suspected they would not be paid the same as their European colleagues, but rather remuneration ‘approximate to that of the trained teacher or other government employee’.\(^{87}\) He described a system of self-governance that he felt would work best, suggesting that a Fijian superintendent be sent to each province, with oversight of the ‘old type’ of ministers, with European missionaries retained as deputy chairmen to manage the circuit finances.\(^{88}\)

Charles Lelean did not explicitly connect financial incompetence with the communal system or the chiefs, but he urged the mission to continue to recognise chiefly power, which was:

> supposed to be waning, but it is still a power to be reckoned with. Each new missionary going to Fiji should be willing to jettison some of his democratic ideas, and make allowances for the authority of the chiefs. We divide our church at home into ministerial and lay. But in Fiji there is a third element — the chiefs.\(^{89}\)

Charles Lelean was aware that endorsing chiefly authority challenged missionaries who sought a more egalitarian structure, and that chiefs were still associated with the idea of ‘primitive’ societies. Missionaries still wondered how the Indo-Fijian branch of the church would overcome its own internal social stratification.

The events of the 1930s forced missionaries to extrapolate and explain their reasons for supporting an organisation designed on race, culture and class. There were numerous practicalities to consider, but both the missionaries and non-European Methodists were increasingly aware of the racial dynamic that shaped their working lives. The protocols around who could access certain public or private spaces, and who could hold positions of authority and status were reassessed. Racial theories and colonial culture continued to reinforce European hegemony, but Methodist communities throughout Fiji, in both the Fijian and Indo-Fijian branches, consistently pushed the boundaries.

Australian anthropology, popular with John W Burton, was used to support the proliferation of separate spheres within the mission. Anthropological theories filtered into the Fiji mission field through his publications, and his concepts of

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\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., p. 4.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.
culture and race that informed discussions in the ecumenical movement for the development of native churches. As in earlier decades, missionaries hoped that they could assuage anti-colonial sentiment by fostering the positive elements of emerging nationalisms in the colony.\textsuperscript{90} Missionaries used the promise of devolution, especially the promise of self-government, to abate virulent new nationalisms, but were not necessarily ready to see authority pass out of European hands.
