Conclusion

On 10 October 1964, 20,000 people spilled onto the streets of Suva and into Albert Park to mark the birth of Fiji’s Methodist Church. The Reverend Setareki Tuilovoni was inducted as its president by the President General of the Australasian Methodist Church, the Reverend Frank Hambly, and by the Reverend Cecil Gribble, General Secretary of the Methodist Church of Australia’s Department of Overseas Missions.1 ‘In the still swelling sea of faces around us’, wrote one retired missionary who attended the event, it was visibly ‘time for Independence!’2 This ceremony marked the symbolic end of Australasian colonisation of Fijian Methodism.

The mission was part of the transnational imperial network. Typical of colonial institutions, the Methodist mission created boundaries that went beyond the practical limits of language difference. Methodists in Fiji were categorised according to class, race and culture. It was along these lines that processes of inclusion and exclusion were defined. The mission’s connections to the International Missionary Council and the World Conference of Churches, the Methodist Overseas Missions of Australasia, and Australian anthropologists informed the way that missionaries approached their work. These networks sometimes affirmed the divisions that missionaries had established in Fiji, however, they also sometimes encouraged missionaries to question their methods. The ‘three selves’ policy, drawn from the international ecumenical movement, brought missionaries to reflect on their own position within the colonial power dynamic. The debates that emerged around the implementation of self-support, self-governance and self-propagation in Fiji illuminated many of the complexities of governing the colony, and how Europeans, Indo-Fijians and Fijians engaged with each other.

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2 R H Green, My Story: A Record of the Life and Work of Robert H Green, Melbourne, 1978, p. 360.
Missionary approaches to the ‘three selves’ church policy contributed to the decision to divide the mission according to race in 1901. Essentialised perceptions of Fijian and Indo-Fijian cultures that depicted the two peoples as irreconcilably different were incorporated into the mission’s structure. The ‘three selves’ church concept required the establishment of ‘native churches’ that reflected the national character, and with two distinct communities, missionaries believed this required two separate missions in Fiji. The creation of separate spaces for religious practice contributed to strengthening the expression of different cultural identities. Missionaries developed these ideas about governance in the same circles and were exposed to the same ideas as colonial administrators. Both were often engaging in the latest debates about race and culture occurring in anthropology. How they responded to these arguments and applied them to their own working lives depended on each person’s character and the limitations placed on them by their institution or conditions in the locality where they worked.

In both the ‘Fijian’ and ‘Indo-Fijian’ parts of the mission, non-European peoples were excluded from positions of status. Ideas about race and culture were fused with ideas about class. In Fiji, customary hierarchies could be translated into the colonial context. Chiefly status gave Fijians some leverage into certain spheres of the colony’s upper classes throughout the early twentieth century. Similarly, those who had attained certain levels of education could ascend the class system. However, as education was often only available to people of certain races, and quality education afforded only to a few, there were limits on class mobility. European missionaries controlled access to education, attendance at synods, and ministerial appointments to roles such as circuit superintendent and district chairman. The boundaries became more fluid over time, and this book has followed the ways in which Fijians became gradually more socially mobile. Talatala were admitted into synods and financial sessions in the first decade of the twentieth century. Theological education was enhanced, which paved the way to self-governance. From 1930 onwards, talatala were employed as circuit superintendents, and in 1962 the mission instated its first Fijian president. The Indo-Fijian branch of the mission lagged behind the Fijian branch. Indo-Fijians were not able to enter theological education in Fiji until 1927, and were not circuit superintendents until 1939.

While the Indo-Fijian branch trailed behind the Fijian branch in fulfilling the ‘three selves’ church policy, missionaries often considered the Indian ‘race’ and ‘cultures’ to be stronger and more sophisticated than their Fijian counterparts. The mission constructed a racial hierarchy that mirrored the colonial system.

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of categorisation. A wage scale was created according to the assumed needs of their workers, based on essentialist understandings of each culture. European missionaries were paid a wage that was usually double the amount paid to Indo-Fijian ministers, and more still than indigenous ministers. The European wage was set to support a ‘European’ lifestyle; Indo-Fijian workers were paid a wage deemed adequate to support an ‘Indian’ lifestyle, which equated with that paid to Indo-Fijian mission workers in India; and Fijian mission workers were paid an amount that was assumed to be subsidised by the communal system of reciprocity. The mission instituted a racial system of pay that remained in place throughout the 64 years covered in this book. Knowing that race and culture fed the decisions to allocate wages in this way, non-European ministers — especially Ramsey Deoki — made wages the focus of their contests against colonial power. This was because the wage scale was one of the most tangible, visible emblems of inequity in the mission. Whether it was exclusion from financial meetings, or being denied equal rates of pay, non-European ministers were frustrated by the limitations placed on their equal involvement in the mission’s economies.

John Kelly suggested that there was precedence placed on protecting Fijian rights and that race became the key organising factor in Fiji, rather than class.\(^4\) This promoted a non-transformative or protective mode of colonialism. There were several points at which the colonial administration’s desires to implement a non-transformative style of governance directly contributed to the shape of the mission. One of the best examples of this was the separate labour ordinance created for Fijians in 1912, as discussed in Chapter Four. This ordinance set Fijians apart from the Indo-Fijian workers in Fiji at the same time as it attempted to diminish the impact of colonialism on the communal social system. The mission’s policies tended to mirror the colonial administration’s system of separation and cultural acclimatisation. Robert Norton has noted that this system gave rise to Fijian paramountcy, a process that was exemplified by the history of Fiji’s Methodist mission.\(^5\) With the overwhelming majority of the mission’s membership being Fijian, Fijian culture and custom became central to the mission’s identity. This occurred despite lingering concerns about the possibility of indigenous extinction in the first three decades of the twentieth century, an idea informed by demographic trends. It seemed to most that Fiji was destined to become an Indian state over the following decades. While there were efforts to encourage more modern relationships between Fijian and the vanua, there was always an effort made to sustain certain parts of indigenous culture, and this fed an indigenous paramountcy that was mirrored and promoted by the colonial administration.


Allusions to land, or the *vanua*, in mission discussions also often revealed attempts to ensure — at least emblematically — Fijian ascendancy. This was demonstrated most clearly in the mission’s efforts to ensure Fijian access to land through aiding Fijians to demonstrate that they could work in ways that would make it profitable in a western sense. The conceptualisation of the *vanua* and the Fijians’ birthright emerged several times: in 1912, Henry Worrall likened the relationship between Fijians and Indo-Fijians to the Biblical story of Esau and Jacob; and in the 1920s, Benjamin Meek, Principal of the Methodist Navuso Agricultural School, described the land as the Fijians’ birthright. This discourse was also prevalent in discussions in 1930s Melbourne, as Arthur Lelean negotiated support from businessmen for the independent farming schemes that he believed would help to secure financial self-support for the mission. While Lelean endorsed a more transformative mode of colonialism with greater indigenous engagement in capitalist economies, the same hallmarks of dialogics operated around land, labour and belonging that marginalised Indo-Fijians. European missionaries at times exacerbated the resulting tensions. Anxieties about maintaining Fijians’ connection to *vanua*, a phenomena that anthropologists such as Matthew Tomlinson have observed over the past three decades, have their roots in Fiji’s most devoted Methodist villages, such as Toko.

As discussed in the final chapter, some of the Indo-Fijian Methodists who represented the mission’s racial minority met independence with trepidation. This is similar to Maelin Pickering Bhagwan’s conclusions about the debates around amalgamation in the mission.\(^6\) Beyond the issues of land, racism, finances, and autonomy, there was also a sense that amalgamation would lead to a loss of identity. Indo-Fijians would have to be submissive to Fijians to ensure that their programs were financed and that they would maintain some significant role in the governance of the independent church. The pre-eminence given to Fijian culture was evident in Tippett’s booklet, created for the independence celebrations in 1964:

> There were now three loyalties that every Fijian had to consider — the Land (Vanua), to the Church (Lotu) and the Government (Matanitu). This triple loyalty pattern makes the Fijian situation different from that of the other races in the Colony, but the Fijian acceptance of this reality is manifest in speeches and prayers on all public occasions. It raises problems which the new Conference will have to face.\(^7\)

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Tippett directed this specifically to a Fijian audience, to the exclusion of the small yet significant Indo-Fijian Methodist community. As Norton and others have argued, Christianity became central to the Fijian ‘cultural complex’. Christianity was rarely considered a part of Indo-Fijian community identity — Methodist Indo-Fijians inhabited a marginalised status in both their own and the Methodist community.

Indo-Fijian Methodists were sidelined in the mission, despite missionaries’ efforts to defend their liberties. One of the most important transnational connections for Indo-Fijian Methodists was with Christian leaders, such as Charles Freer Andrews, in India. The mission recruited Indian and European catechists and missionaries, supporting the mobility of men and women from India to Fiji and vice versa, trying to find workers who would respect and accommodate Indo-Fijian cultures. Through travel and correspondence, the mission’s workers remained abreast of developments in anti-colonial movements and methods for managing colonialism and decolonisation in India. However, this was always counteracted by the flow of anti-colonial politics from the broader social scene into the mission, such as the demands for self-governance influenced by Gandhi’s Home Rule campaign in Fiji during the 1920s, and crusades against unequal labour conditions. Concepts of culture informed the creation of a system that so closely aligned with racial segregation that they were resisted throughout the colonial period.

While European missionaries pledged their dedication to the concept of establishing native churches, their commitment was often strangled by theories of racial or cultural difference. This book has highlighted the various ways in which European missionaries used ideas from mission councils and anthropology to respond to the presence of two distinct racial and cultural groups in Fiji. The discourse of unity and integration that proliferated during the 1950s and 1960s was incongruent with the reality of Fiji’s divided society. This study of the Methodist mission offers an understanding of the legacies of the racial and cultural boundaries that existed within Fiji’s colonial society. At the time it separated from Australia, the Methodist Church of Fiji was still segregated according to race and culture, and it will be worth the reader’s consideration as to how this paralleled with the independence of Fiji as a nation state.

It is also important to consider ways in which these historical fractures are reflected in commemorations for the mission’s history. The Methodist Church of Fiji had its golden jubilee in September 2014, at which the Toko farmers were incorporated into celebrations with special visits from church dignitaries. There are important shifts occurring in today’s church, thanks in part to the efforts of leader James Bhagwan. While at times there are signs of the same old ethnicised divisions operating, as with Methodist ministers’ comments around the time of the 2014 national elections, leaders such as Bhagwan represent a new phase for the church that eschews division and works towards greater unity. Hopes are alive for a more multicultural church. One of the greatest signs of the church’s efforts to attend to this divided past was the reconciliation ceremony held for the Reverend Josateki Koroi in 2014. Koroi — a moderate leader — had been ousted forcefully from the Methodist offices and ejected from his position as president by ethno-nationalists within the Methodist church in 1987. When speaking to Koroi about this in 2010, it was evident that the events still caused considerable consternation. This reconciliation process — even if it is only a symbolic gesture — will make a considerable difference for individuals, as well as shifting the public perception of the Methodist church as a site where racial antagonism is incited.

Despite the intensely detailed research I have included in this book, it remains rather a general history. Having spanned such a sweeping historical period, there is potential for finer, more comprehensive research on people, places and events that have been referred to only briefly. These could include studies into some of the individuals who worked in the mission, such as Setareki Tuilovoni, Charles Lelean, Arthur J Small, and Richard L Burton. The mission’s female workers also demand much closer attention, though I have included them wherever possible. Morven Sidal’s work on Hannah Dudley has been fairly comprehensive, but figures such as Dr Dorothy Delbridge, who worked at the Ba hospital, need to have their work recognised and properly added to the historical record. Other aspects of the mission’s history, such as the use of mission houses as

9 Two weeks before the 2014 election, Reverend Iliesa Naivalu, a minister from the Methodist church, circulated a letter in which he advised Fijians to vote ‘wisely’ to ensure that Fiji becomes a Christian state. In doing this, he was encouraging people to vote for SODELP, a party that promotes indigenous Fijian ascendency. Naivalu’s letter adopted exclusivist language that had been the hallmark of Fiji’s ethno-nationalist politics: ‘Christianity was being engraved in the lives of the iTaukei people.’ He accused the state of trying to ‘downgrade the God Almighty, his Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to be equal with idols that are being worshipped in Fiji today’, and suggested that the Methodist church wanted to aid ‘good relations and interaction of the different ethnic groups in Fiji’, but stated that peace would only exist if indigenous hegemony was maintained. See K Close-Barry, ‘What’s so Anti-Christian about Equality?’, Republika, October 2014, pp. 30–32, issuu.com/republikamag/docs/october_2014.


markers of status, could be elaborated on by conducting oral histories in the areas where mission houses were located. Such studies would further enhance our understanding of displays of status and the maintenance of boundaries during the colonial period. As others have noted of Fiji, two ethnicised nationalisms emerged throughout the colonial period.

That missionaries attempted to establish a ‘national church’, but could not reconcile their ideas of race, suggests that the Methodist mission played a role in consolidating the ethnic divisions that have continued into the post-colonial period. Although this is an historical study, it can inform the way we understand the Methodist church, and Fijian nationalism as it exists today.