Preface

In 2010, when I conducted fieldwork at Nalaga, a small village in the north-west of Fiji’s main island of Viti Levu, the lali (drum) was one of the significant sounds that marked time in the village, signalling the start of church-based events, including Bible studies and women’s groups.

Figure 1: ‘The lali’.

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, 327-535, pic acc 7061, neg 79, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. Published with permission of Uniting Church of Australia.
Nailaga has a special place for my family, so I felt at ease there. It was my Granny’s stories that first took me to Nailaga. Members of my family had lived there for years at a time, working as missionaries for the Methodist Church of Australasia. In fact, my family was, for generations before Granny came along, part of the processes of colonisation in the Pacific. Leaving England for Hobart in 1839, my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather John Waterhouse took up the position of General Superintendent for the Methodist Mission of Australasia, overseeing the Pacific Island mission sites. Several of his sons subsequently travelled to Fiji in later decades to spread the Word. Most notable among them was Joseph Waterhouse, who lived at Viwa throughout crucial years of deliberation for Ratu Epinisa Cakobau, who in 1874 negotiated the cession of the islands to Britain. Joseph Waterhouse was the brother of my great-great-great-great-grandfather, Roland. A few decades later, the first of my ancestors arrived in the north-west of Viti Levu. This was Roland’s grandson, Charles Oswald Lelean. Nailaga was Uncle Charlie’s first port of call after arriving in Fiji fresh from theological training at Queens College in Melbourne. His first wife died and was buried there. Approximately 30 years after Charlie had started working in Fiji, his nephew Arthur Drew Lelean followed. This was my great-grandfather. My grandmother, Alison, was born in Suva while her father worked on Taveuni. Arthur took over the superintendency of Ba district in 1923, when Granny was only two years old, and Nailaga became the place where she ran amok with her brothers and enjoyed cakes and cucumber sandwiches with her Nanna.

Here I was, just over 80 years since Arthur Lelean and his family had left Fiji, with a different purpose. I am not a missionary, but I wanted to understand the work my family had done in Fiji. I did not want to write a hagiography, nor did I want to be a glorified genealogist. I was prepared to be critical. However, I was learning that my great-grandfather Arthur had supported a grassroots Fijian nationalist movement through the 1920s and ‘30s, and with my interest in indigenous efforts to assert autonomy in the face of European colonial control, I could not ignore what he had done during his time in Ra province.

Hearing the lali, Arthur did not seem so far away. I was reminded of the question that other scholars have posed about missionaries’ role as imperialists, or as the harbingers of modernity. Many have queried the extent to which missionaries acted as cultural imperialists, or whether they were beneficiaries

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of the processes of colonialism. The lali — a mark of Fiji’s ‘ancient’ culture — was still being used to communicate, to mark time, to call people together. The lali had either defied the rhythm of colonialism, or somehow beat alongside it. It symbolised a continuation of indigenous culture where I had presumed that, like in Australia, European norms would have been enforced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While walking in the footsteps of my ancestors, I learned that the Methodist mission was very much a part of the colonial landscape, and has played a large role in fostering the divisions between the indigenous and Indo-Fijian communities we see in Fijian society today. Not only were indigenous and Indo-Fijian church members kept out of the highest positions of authority in the mission for as long as possible, but the mission was organised in a way that can be described as racial segregation. This book examines closely the processes through which the Methodist mission was organised on ideas about race and culture. In particular, it looks at the Methodist mission’s response to the challenge of catering to two large ethnic populations in Fiji during the twentieth century — the indigenous community, and the Indian diaspora community. Missionaries tried to build two ‘national’ Methodist churches: one ‘Fijian’ and one ‘Indo-Fijian’.

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