

8. Griffith's Transnational Fijians: Between the Devil, the Deep Blue Sea...and their Pastors

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This chapter is about Fijians and their movements to and from an isolated rural area in Australia (Schubert 2008).¹ Pacific Islanders go to some of the most unlikely, isolated places and form communities and ways of communicating with other like-communities as survival tactics. This occurs in the face of pressures both in their homelands and their 'receiving' countries. Pacific Islanders endure adverse economic and political conditions at home. Although migration is an apparent solution to this 'squeeze' (Peutz 2006, 230), Islanders arriving in the United States, Australia and New Zealand find themselves being squeezed by an unforgiving labour market in which they must find a role to survive and often, in the early stages of migration, an absence of supportive kin networks. Quite aside from these post-entry issues, there is the initial problem of obtaining migrant entry.

In response to such pressures, a few hundred Pacific Islanders, specifically Tongans, Cook Islanders, Samoans, Vanuatuans, Solomon Islanders, Papua New Guineans, along with more than a hundred Fijians and fifty Fiji Indians have moved to Griffith, in south-west New South Wales, Australia. The majority of the Fijians and Fiji Indians of Griffith have emigrated in reaction to movements in societal structures of two different types on which they were dependent. The first were political and economic structures closely tied to each other, and also to structures outside Fiji. Fiji's major post-colonial political organisation was and is based on a division between Fiji Indians and Fijians. This division has its basis in a constitution underwritten by a schema that Fijians, as Fiji's foundation people, have pre-eminence over Fiji Indians. However, this unwritten understanding and articulated constitutional point has been continually contradicted by events, specifically in 1987, when a Fiji Labour Government won an election and although led by a Fijian, was perceived by many Fijians as an 'Indian' Government. Its election victory was enabled by Fiji's voting system, itself a child of the same Constitution.

The Fiji Army's suspension of Fiji's Constitution after a military coup that same year displeased the neighbouring governments of Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and also Fiji's pre-independence colonial power, Britain. Their unions boycotted transportation of goods to Fiji, which affected everyone; tourists stayed away; and aid, a source of so much public sector funding, was

suspended. There were multiplier effects to Fiji's banking and credit system. These events directly affected some of Griffith's Fijians and Fiji Indians.

The political instability of 1987 had further long-term effects. It left some Fiji Indians feeling insecure about their futures, a feeling Pangerl (2007) identified as persisting almost two decades later among Fiji Indians. It stimulated changes in attitudes to land leasing, which affected the parents of some of Griffith's Fiji Indians. It also enabled, in subsequent years, a government policy of affirmative action for Fijians.

The second type of structures in which movements pushed Griffith's Fijians and Fiji Indians into emigration — cultural ones — were not experienced as a result of one epishift in a set of linked macro-structures on which so many depended. They were instead the effect of shifts in household relationships about which beliefs as to their differential roles, responsibilities and inheritance rules were fairly commonly held and reproduced from household-to-household across Fijian and Fiji Indian societies; for example, household relationships between husband and wife, interrupted by divorce, death or abandonment, or between parent and child because of emigration. Other of Griffith's Fiji Indians and Fijians either did not have to face such personal events or were unaffected by the more general ones, which enabled them the room to choose what they wanted and how they would achieve it.

Griffith is not a place in which one would expect to find Fijians, Fiji Indians and other Pacific Islanders. Although it is the largest population centre in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area and has a regional population of about 23,000, of which 14,000 people live in the 25 square kilometers of the town, its ecology and climate bear little resemblance to the wet, mountainous greenery by the sea, from which Fijians and Fiji Indians originate, and has been described by one of its natives, Hollywood-based film director Philip Noyce, as 'a small town...surrounded by a desert' (Petzke 2004, 4). It is dry, flat and windy, its flatness and red earth punctuated only by the green leafy tops of orange trees and monotonous, unending rows of grape vines. In summer, Griffith's temperatures can climb to 45°C and in winter drop to minus 4°C.

How do we account for the creation and maintenance of communities such as these Fijians and Fiji Indians on the edge of Australia's desert? Contrary to the manner in which Griffith's Fijians organise themselves, Griffith's Fiji Indians are largely isolated from each other due to their having had very few pre-migration relations; having arrived in Australia and Griffith at different times; and having different types and levels of incorporation into Australian society (the majority of them have arrived in Australia as documented migrants). Their mutual isolation is also a residual outcome of the process of indenture from India to Fiji that left their forebears with the experience of lack of kin and absence of adequate numbers of members of their own and other castes to re-establish a

caste system in Fiji (Jayawardena 1971; Grieco 1998). Their mutual isolation is, however, complemented by some limited links, but mainly between those of the same religion, Indian region-of-origin and family type.

The focus of this paper is Griffith's Fijian population. The step-migration of Fijians to this unlikely location on the edge of the Australian desert is the result of two factors. Firstly, Australian migration entry rules over the last two decades have increasingly favoured migrants with skills and capital, and such requirements have meant that Fijians (and others) have found it increasingly difficult to obtain permanent entry to Australia. Secondly, with political instability in Fiji causing uncertainty, especially for urban Fijians and those predominantly dependent on cash for their livelihoods, Fijians have had to deploy entry tactics to Australia such as marriage to an Australian citizen for visa sponsorship, and overstaying after entering on a tourist visa, as a means of delaying or avoiding return to Fiji.

While I was conducting fieldwork in 2003 and 2004, 49 of the 79 Fijians (67 per cent) in Griffith were either undocumented or had been so at some time in the previous two decades. Twenty of them had been sponsored in some form and only five had arrived in Australia as authorised, permanent, migrants.

The tactic of overstaying has been no guarantee of avoiding harassment or removal from Australia by immigration authorities. In fact, it was and is a sure way to invite it. But settlement in Griffith, about four hours drive from the nearest Department of Immigration office in Canberra, has been a tactic used by Fijians to minimise detection by immigration authorities in the cities and in the hope that, at some future point, immigration entry rules may change or some other means of being documented, such as spousal sponsorship, will be found. While undocumented Fijians wait for this day, their settled relatives and friends, both documented and undocumented, can provide plentiful low or unskilled work for them, including orange, grape and vegetable picking. Griffith's economic base is agricultural output of four types: fruit, vegetables, rice, and meat stock such as cattle and poultry (Griffith City Council 2003).

Many of these agricultural products provide the basis for a range of secondary industries. With about 25 per cent of Australia's wine grapes grown in the area, there is an extensive wine-making industry. Sixteen of Australia's largest wineries have plants in the area which accounts for 80 per cent of all wine produced in New South Wales (Griffith City Council 2003). Other fruit and vegetable produce is processed by two large processing plants and poultry is processed by Australia's second largest processor of poultry meat (Griffith City Council 2003).

The abundance of Griffith's agricultural and secondary agricultural output means a low unemployment rate. Australia's 2001 Census showed that Griffith's unemployment rate was 4.9 per cent, significantly lower than either the New South Wales rate of 7.2 per cent or the national rate of 7.4 per cent (Australian

Bureau of Statistics 2001). Affluence is evident in the abundance of expensive cars driven along Griffith's main street, Banna Avenue, a thoroughfare lined with chic restaurants, bistros and bars, the likes of which one would normally expect to find in Melbourne's Brunswick or Lygon Streets, Brisbane's West End or Sydney's Balmain.

While undocumented Fijians generally work in different locations from their documented kin and friends, in the evenings and on weekends they retreat to their own 'Fijian spaces' to recreate and choreograph Fiji, whether with the daily ritual of *yaqona* (kava) drinking, or the less frequent rites of passage (*vakabogiva*) that follow usually four nights after births, deaths and the onset of puberty. These take place in domestic spaces, as well as in their churches and community meetings.

With a relatively permanent, core Fijian group with permanent residence or citizenship, there is a continual flow of Fijians through Griffith; for example, visiting relatives and friends who arrive to earn as much cash as they can, while they can, before deciding whether 'going on the run' from immigration authorities will pay off financially. In some cases, Fijians are on their way to Iraq as 'security specialists', or to East Timor as police officers. Others are simply relatives and friends from New Zealand with that country's citizenship.

There is also frequent movement from Griffith to Fiji for short holidays, funerals, weddings and births. Other temporary destinations are New Zealand and, in one case, frequent visits by a Griffith resident (Australian citizen) husband to his Fijian wife working in California without authorisation, but whose work in California paid for rent of his flat in Griffith.

The Fijians in Griffith are also connected to Fiji through a range of means including email, mainly from the local library and the town's two internet cafes, and telephone. Apart from the favourite topic of conversation in Griffith, which is 'who has been caught by...who is on the run from...who is waiting to get their papers from...Immigration', a frequent topic of conversation is the relative benefits of the many available phone cards that can be purchased from any of Griffith's corner milk bars to provide the cheapest possible overseas phone calls. The most popular card Fijians used for phoning overseas when I was conducting fieldwork was *Good Morning Pakistan*.

Strolls with Fijian friends along Griffith's main thoroughfare on summer evenings were frequently interrupted as one or another headed to a nearby phone booth and, with a spare phone card in his pocket, phoned a friend in Fiji to discuss a debt, an approaching wedding in Fiji, or a proposal to bring a relative to Australia on a tourist visa. In one household, I frequently observed the husband making a phone call to his wife's aunt, who was staying without documents in the US; then calling his mother in Sigatoka; then, on two occasions, calling a recruitment

agent in Dubai to enquire about a job vacancy in the United Arab Emirates that he had seen on the internet.

In another case, apart from the local phone calls into and out of the household over one day, I observed a phone call to Lautoka in western Fiji to arrange for the safe transportation of the family's youngest child from his boarding school in central Fiji to Nadi Airport; then a call to the child's sister in Sydney to ensure he would be picked up from the airport to catch the right shuttle flight to Griffith. Later that night, when the child had arrived home in Griffith, the father, using the same card, phoned his brother, a *talatala* (pastor) in Seattle, and spoke and joked for two hours.

The flow of Fijians into and out of Griffith is determined by more than just an autonomous desire to stay to live and work or find greener fields elsewhere. The pressure from Australian immigration authorities on one side, and authority figures from Fiji on the other, makes it difficult for many in the Griffith community to move on and, for others, difficult to stay. The Immigration Department's increasingly frequent visits to Griffith have forced undocumented Fijians to decide between taking their chances in Griffith, where they are familiar with the physical layout and live in a set of trusted Fijian relationships; or move to another town and risk detection in an unfamiliar location and relatively untested social network. There is some risk in being undocumented among one's documented kin and friends as some Fijians' disagreements and altercations can result in being 'dobb'd in' to the immigration authorities.

Fijians refer to the Immigration Department as *tevoru* (devil), a concept that locates departmental officials on the antagonistic, profane side of a migration cosmology that, in making sense of and justifying their migrations and undocumentedness, Fijian settlers construct out of a constellation of discourses and narratives that can draw on pre-Christian mythology, the post-migration power of Fijian Christian worship practices, and appeals to Biblical discourses of Israel, oppression, famine, flight and a Promised Land. In the first case of pre-Christian mythology, for example, some of Griffith's Fijians from Fiji's southern island of Kadavu tell the story of an octopus, the totem for some Kadavus, which caught a shark and would not let it go. Pleading to be released, the shark agreed to the octopus' deal that Kadavus should, from that time on, never be harmed by *any* sharks, *anywhere*. This story is then usually quickly followed up by the relating of an incident in which a young boy from Kadavu stowed away on a ship to Sydney. When he arrived in Sydney Harbour, the story goes, he jumped ship and was never seen again. 'The Harbour authorities kept on saying that the sharks in the Harbour must have eaten him. But *we knew!...we knew that he was safe! The sharks never hurt people from Kadavu!*' said my Kadavu informant, an elder in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

There was also a frequently related story of a Fijian congregation in Sydney that, through the construction of the story's characters, pits undocumented but righteous and clever Fijians against secular, white, plodding immigration officers. The story goes that in a church, the benediction was about to be delivered by the *talatala*. But just as he closed his eyes to deliver it for the large number of Fijians present, he was told by one of the deacons that the *tevoru* (immigration authorities) were outside the church waiting to detain him for having overstayed his visa. As the rest of the congregation closed their eyes, he began to *masu* (pray) but, as he so did, he moved close to a window at the back of the church through which he climbed and took flight down the road, leaving his congregation with their eyes closed, while putting as much distance as he could between himself and the *tevoru*. Some versions of this story have an addendum to the effect that half of the congregation followed the *talatala* in flight from the *tevoru* for the very same reason.

Hybridised Biblical discourses are used in conversation, not to show the powers on which Fijians can ultimately draw when faced with white, secular immigration officers, but to justify their own undocumented migrations to Australia and subsequent step-migrations to Griffith. For example, undocumented Milly, who along with her husband Michael had been given shelter and food by her distant relative Meri,² combined the quite distinct Old Testament stories of Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12) with Joseph's brothers (Genesis 42), as she explained: 'All we wanted to do was to come to Australia to eat, to drink, to survive ... we couldn't in the village in Fiji ... we were just like Abram and Sarai who went into Egypt because of famine in Canaan.'

The use of such a hybridised Biblical rationale fits within a far wider, grander Biblically-based discourse that some Fijians use to frame the coups in Fiji in 1987 and 2000. According to Daniel,³ from western Fiji, who was one of George Speight's gunmen in the 2000 coup attempt, and who was visiting relatives in Griffith:

It is not the Indians who are our problem. The Indians are our brothers and sisters. It is the Lauans and the others without land who are the problem. We people from the interior of Viti Levu...we have land...we are the true rulers of Viti, not these Islanders, who use Fiji and its wealth for themselves. God gave *us* the land. These others play around with it, abuse it. They have led us away from God. So God uses the Indians to win power in Fiji to punish we Fijians when we stray from Him, like God did to the Israelites by allowing the Philistines to invade and punish them.

On the other side of the *tevoru* in this equation are the *talatalas* who pass through Griffith from Fiji. The messages they deliver can be summarised in the admonition 'do not stray from *vakavanua* (Fijian way), from the protocol of the village'. Like

their migrant congregations, they frequently draw sermons from the Old Testament that frame Fijians as the Israelites and Australia, with its money and secularism, as Babylon. 'Return home' is the underlying message, but also, 'if you must be in Australia, *be Fijian*'.

Talatalas complain that when Fijians return to Fiji with a life and assets in Australia, or with money earned from casual labour during a holiday, they expect to be listened to in the village and the church, an expectation that stands regardless of the position they held in the village prior to emigrating. 'They have learned about *human rights* in Australia', a Seventh Day Adventist *talatala* from Suva on a three-week evangelistic campaign in Griffith complained to me, 'but they don't know how to be Fijian'.

In spite of a generic respect for their *talatalas*, Griffith's Fijians pay lip-service to their admonitions. The logic of this lip-service is simple: if one does not have permanent residence or citizenship, returning to Fiji means being unable to go back to Australia without being barred for a significant period from applying for a visa for a return trip, an exclusion period of up to five years. So, for the undocumented, staying unlawfully in Griffith is the most economically rational choice.

For Fijian permanent residents and citizens of Australia, the logic of their lip-service is also very simple. First, a permanent return to Fiji is financially unattractive. Second, to be Fijian, to be all-inclusive and have open pockets would be disastrous in a ruthless market economy like Australia's. Griffith does provide some relief from the expectation that its settled Fijians will provide an economic buffer to the newly arrived and undocumented. Living costs, especially for food, can be significantly reduced by creating relationships with farmers by providing them with a ready Fijian labour force at harvest time, as many of the long-settled Fijians have done. The farmers are often happy to provide, in return, the best agricultural produce that is surplus to their own or their markets' requirements, at no cost to the Fijians and other Pacific Islanders.

The buffer that the long-settled Fijians and those who have accumulated sufficient assets to carry the costs for those who have not yet achieved such a level does, however, have a limit. After a formal interview with a couple who continually had Fijian kin and friends lodging with them (including me for six months), they asked me if I could help a couple, who had been living with and depending on them for about four years, to obtain a visa of some kind to reduce the financial burden on them, the hosts. The unmanageable cost to them had not been the household utility costs or food, but the cost of medicines and medical specialist treatment, which they claimed had accumulated to AUD\$30,000.

So, how do we account for the creation and maintenance of this Fijian community on the edge of Australia's desert? It has emerged out of attraction to work as a means of survival and its distance from government surveillance. But Griffith's

attractiveness to Fijians is more than that. Along with the continued availability of work and the ability Fijians have to communicate with other Fijians in Australia, Fiji and elsewhere, even in its relative isolation Griffith is still close enough to the major transport portal of Sydney to enable quick and cheap movement to and from Fiji. Sydney can be reached from Griffith in one hour by air and about six hours by car, bus and train; and a few hours after arriving in Sydney, a Griffith Fijian can be in Fiji sitting doing *tanoa* (drinking kava) in his or her home village or out looking for cousins in their town market place. Thus Griffith not only allows its Fijians to physically survive and, if needed, avoid the Immigration Department, but it also allows a few Fijians to be truly *transnational* (with more relationships in Australia with non-Fijians), but most to be truly *transmigrant* (with more relationships with Fijians in Australia and Fiji) (Scott 2003) through living in a place that enables the Fijian part of Griffith to be one section of a larger, single Fijian community that extends across three (or more) nation-states.⁴ While Australia and Fiji have no common borders, Griffith, located inland, plays for its Fijians the role that the US-Mexican border does 'for many Mexicans who travel between...Aguililla (Michoacin) and Redwood City (California), between which such separate places become effectively a single community' (Clifford 1994, 304). To paraphrase Rouse (1991, 14) this occurs through the continuous circulation of money, information, cultural affirmations and people.

Thus for Fijians moving between such communities, nation-states and their borders are simply in their way. At one time, Fijians, like other Pacific Islanders migrated, traded, colonised and waged war across their deep blue sea in sea-going vessels. In the 21st century, Fijians still move across that deep blue sea, although now mainly through the air above it and then across deserts to places like Griffith. While such journeys and settlements take place against a backdrop of unpredictable secular, white Australians who can put a stop to Fijians' migration projects, Griffith's Fijians' moral self-constructions and justifications, based on identification with Biblical characters and their divinely inspired quests, give them a feeling of moral power greater than anything to which an Australian immigration officer has access.

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ENDNOTES

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² These are pseudonyms.

³ A pseudonym.

⁴ Fiji, Australia and New Zealand (we might even include the west coast of the USA).