



ON BEING FIJIAN

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By now most of you have heard of the coup in Fiji. About 30 of our people are being held hostage. The President has been forced to resign and the Constitution put in place in 1997 has been revoked. The army has taken over and for the most part law and order have been restored. Most of the world thinks that little is being done to resolve the crisis. They are wrong.

I have been invited to this meeting as a Fijian, a housewife, and mother of three. In addition, with my husband I look after my mother and a nephew. I was born and raised in Fiji, I am a Fiji citizen, and I intend to die and be buried in Fiji.

I do not represent any government or organisation. I speak only as a Fijian, which in Fiji is understood to mean 'indigenous Fijian'. Other ethnic groups are called 'Fiji citizens', but not 'Fijians'. When I say 'Fijian' in what follows, I mean 'indigenous Fijian'.

I want to speak to you from the bottom of my heart and try to explain certain things about the Fijian values, customs, ways of communicating, mode of leadership, and sensitivities. I want to speak to you about the soul of Fijians. I hope that I can touch the souls of indigenous people everywhere.

We are a people who have occupied what is now the Fiji Islands for thousands of years. When we came, as far as anyone knows, no one else occupied the land. Our traditional oral history tells how we came and how

we settled. Fiji is our 'Promised Land', the land of our forefathers. Our language and customs are at one with our people and our land and our genealogy.

In 1874 our land was 'ceded to Great Britain' under Queen Victoria. We were under attack by our neighbours, the 'Friendly' Islands of Tonga. In addition, our dominant Chief Cakobau was being blackmailed by the local American Consul and had no means of paying the extortionate payment demanded by this man for having accidentally burnt his own house down during a drunken Fourth of July celebration. American warships were on the way. Queen Victoria rescued us from these situations at the invitation of our paramount chief and we 'voluntarily', if you can call it that, became a colony under a Deed of Cession.

There were certain understandings at the time of Cession to Great Britain and there were many things left unsaid. One was that we would continue to be led by our own chiefs with our own style of government, a style that is called 'consensus'. But Queen Victoria also became our Queen. Another understanding was that while others were allowed to use our land, there was no such thing as the permanent alienation of our land, called 'sale' in English. In times of war, some chiefs sold islands out from under their people, but the intent here was to destroy or enslave the people, to detach them from their roots and their livelihood, to publicly humiliate them. If there is a meaning, this is the meaning of 'sale of land' in Fiji. Land is a sensitive issue in Fiji.

In fact there is no word in the Fijian language to describe the 'sale' of land, as the Western world knows it. It is not even a concept. If you were to sell your land, you at the same time sell your forefathers. The term 'sale' is sometimes used, but it really means 'lease', 'rent', or 'use' of land. This concept is familiar to many indigenous societies around the world, and it has been a source of great misunderstanding for people from around the world who have sought to acquire and settle land, and agony for those who thought it was perpetually theirs. We let people use our land and were surprised when they built fences and chased us away with weapons.

The British sent an expert to assess the economic potential of Fiji. This was around the time of the American Civil War and cotton was in great

demand, so cotton was grown for a time. Later it was discovered that sugarcane was a more economic crop. Sugar became our major industry.

The sugar industry, like the cotton industry, required labour. We Fijians were self-sufficient nutritionally and economically with our abundance of sea and land resources. We were not interested in plantation labour. The British brought many workers from another of their colonies, India, to fill this need. These people worked hard, multiplied, and were allowed by the British Colonial Government to stay in Fiji.

At the time our chiefs ceded Fiji to Great Britain, we understood that other people would come and use our abundant land, but we did not foresee an open immigration policy or massive immigration. We did not know that we would come to be outnumbered in Our Sacred Homeland by people from another culture, many of whom did not wish to join our family culturally.

We Fijians pride ourselves on our friendliness and hospitality. We welcome visitors and we try to make them feel at home. We invite them into our homes. But we do not expect them to take over our homes, even if they arrive in great numbers. This has confused people from other cultures who do not understand Fijians.

Fijians live in a communal lifestyle, which survives by sharing. We give and we receive. When the missionaries came and told us it was more blessed to give than to receive, this was nothing new to us. Most Fijians adopted Christianity readily. We found the values consistent with our own. Fijians are very generous people, but within our own system, there are also obligations. Some people from other cultures do not understand this. They think that when someone gives you something, it is a 'good deal', a 'bargain', and you should take more, and more, and more.

The British brought non-indigenous people to Fiji for their colonial economic purposes. They came in great numbers. They were of a different culture with different customs from our own; they married young and multiplied rapidly. For the most part they rigidly clung to their native cultures, religions and value systems. Only a few joined ours. When the British left us independent in 1970, they also left us with a majority

non-indigenous, not very well-integrated population. The British did this in a smaller way all over the world. Perhaps they did not see the problems it would create. Perhaps they did and slyly washed their hands of it. In some cases in Africa, people and their descendants uprooted by the colonial government were offered citizenship in Britain. So many wanted to go to Britain that they had to create two classes of citizenship. Not everyone who became a British citizen in the colonies was then entitled to settle in Britain.

Now Fijians welcome all kinds of people into their families. We especially like people who learn our language and customs. We have many instances of intermarriage and there are no taboos in this regard. But like all human beings, we tend to like people who like us. If people do not respect us, do not learn our customs, do not learn our language, do not learn to pronounce the names of places in Fiji correctly, after multiple generations living in Fiji, we tend to be suspicious of them. We especially don't like it if we perceive that such people try to take over our land and our government, and use fast economic growth, foreign aid, their concept of 'democracy', and 'strictly legal' means to justify it. This is not our way.

We do not like confrontation. When our people disagree, they remain silent. As you can well imagine, this is often misinterpreted by people who demand or expect that we tell them to their faces what we do not want. We want them to be sensitive enough to 'feel' that we don't agree. This is part of our culture.

Economically, Fijians like to do things in their own good time. This is not always fast enough for other people. We have no objection if they move quickly or move on as long as they do not 'step on'.

Politically, we like to make sure everyone agrees before we move forward. We don't like to dominate minorities with majority rule. We like people to feel good about any decision. We are a small place, everybody knows most everybody, and people who try to push their own way get nowhere in the long run. Our value system has much to offer the world. We intend to preserve it and offer it to others. But we are only 350,000 people in a very large world. Size does not bother us. Our rugby teams are among the best in the world and beat countries 500 times our size. We

are known as peacekeepers with UNIFIL. The world needs to learn more harmonious ways of living and we have some good tips. But harmony usually requires the setting of and understanding boundaries of all kinds. We have our limits.

The current situation in Fiji is complex. There are many forces at work. The outside world sees primarily a racial issue. Fijians know that there is also a reconfiguration of power amongst the Fijians. There is a struggle between traditional Fijian confederacies, there is a call for a new confederacy, there is a struggle between the new middle class and the older traditions, and we women have also recently come into the political limelight. Reconfiguration of the Fijians is definitely our problem and no one else's. We will deal with it in our own good time. We welcome your views and un-tied assistance, but we will deal with it.

It is our relationship with our non-indigenous population that has attracted the interest of the world. The world media loves to talk about, exaggerate and exacerbate the problems of 'race'. It provides prime-time coverage and makes people not directly involved feel superior, no matter what they have inside them.

For more than 100 years, Fijians have lived side by side with our non-indigenous neighbours. We did not invite them, but we nevertheless welcomed them. We help them, they help us. We sometimes go to their houses and they often come to ours. We respect each other. We work together. We often drink and eat together. But for the most part, our cultures, and to a large extent our values, remain distinct. We believe that the vast majority of this population just wants to live and work peacefully in Fiji. We welcome this. We even allow them to get rich in Fiji, when few of us Fijians, because of our communal sharing oriented society, can ever aspire to this. Many of them, when they can afford it or have the opportunity, move on to more developed countries with greater opportunities. Some choose to stay and live in harmony with us.

But we have our limits. We have our land, our people, our leaders, our customs, and our souls. We want to be led by our own people who understand us and respect our customs. We cannot alienate any of our land any more than we can alienate our forefathers. Whatever the

economic situation, the political situation, there is a boundary behind which we must fight for our survival as a people. No economic threats, bribery, media hype, or international organisation will step across this line. Some people call this 'indigenous rights'. It is the 'right to survive', have self-determination and ownership of our resources as an indigenous people in our homeland. This is in spite of TV, soap operas, The Simpsons, X-Files, global immigration and trade, all of which we enjoy in moderation just like you.

Recently, perhaps though the influence of TV, broader and better education, and general awareness, our people have become more vocal, and some even more belligerent. The emergence of previously quiet unspoken, usually smiling Fijians in our land is not unlike the emergence of women worldwide. We were not quite like this at the time Great Britain left us with a legacy of parliamentary government and a multiracial population. We listened to our chiefs and our chiefs listened to the Queen of England.

The recent coup in Fiji was conducted at gunpoint by a handful of Fijians and their spokesman, George Speight. Some guns were fired; these people shot no one, although they did put a hole in the roof of our new Parliament building. They took some 40 parliamentarians hostage and some 10 have been released because they were either ill, or willing to sign away their positions in the former government. One was allowed to go home to her mother's funeral, and then return. Even in crisis, we practise the Fijian way.

The verbal manifesto of these rebels included revocation of the 1997 Constitution, resignation of the President, and installation of their own group of people to run the government.

Some self-appointed 'supporters' of the coup went on the rampage burning, smashing, and looting the capital city of Suva. Some even stooped to racial violence, which was totally unnecessary and uncalled for. This is what happens when things get out of control. Every society has its hooligans with a grudge against the world. Our police were caught by surprise. Fortunately, there was surprisingly little violence. A few days later, the first real casualty was a policeman whose car was shot at by

some of the rebel supporters when he ventured into an insecure area. Our ordinary policemen do not, and never have, carried guns.

Why then, didn't the police and/or the army march in and stop this? Why do the Fijians allow a small band of armed rebels to take over their government? Why did security limit itself to restoring law and order in the streets and not the Parliament?

The answer is simple. While most people were disgusted with the violence, the causes espoused by the rebels had a considerable amount of mass support, some of which was out in the open — thousands of people marched; some of which was implicit — refusal to act against the rebels. Strong feelings of resentment have been suppressed by Fijians for decades. To this day, the degree of support for the rebel cause is unknown because no one on the outside really knows what lies at the bottom of the heart and soul of every Fijian. The police force was divided on the basic issues as was the army. One can assume that the whole of the Fijian population is divided or uncertain on the issues involved. We need time to self-examine, time to discuss, time to let our traditional leaders know in our traditional way. The answer is not obvious.

Fortunately, outside nations did not step in. They are watching anxiously, but they are waiting to see if Fijians can solve their own problems. This is good. Bloodshed has been largely avoided, even while the threat and potential exist. Fijians need to be left to solve their considerable problems in their own way and on their own schedule. It takes time to reach a consensus. Interference can make matters much worse and not solve the underlying problem.

The news media are impatient. Every Fijian knows that the whole of Fiji is a hive of talk and activity. Formal and informal meetings are being held. The pubs are alive. The village kava bowls are flowing. The telephones domestically and internationally are abuzz. Gradually the chiefs will learn how their people really feel on the main issues. This is not a time for telling people what they want to hear, spouting religious moralisms, or pushing conventional wisdom. This is a time for searching out one's deepest beliefs and communicating them. Are we going to allow ourselves to be absorbed into the mediocrity of the modern world,

or be dominated politically and economically by a foreign culture numbering nearly one billion people worldwide, or are we going to remain self-reliant and proud of our own culture of some 350,000 people? Are we going to claim our 'indigenous rights', or are we going to join the soap operas of the world?

There are numerous examples of indigenous peoples who have either disappeared from the face of the earth or have been marginalised in their own land. We can look around the Pacific Rim at New Zealand, Australia, the United States, and Canada, at countries where the indigenous people are found mainly on welfare rolls and in the prisons. They are an 'endangered species'. Why? Because they had different customs and traditions that did not stand up well to the onslaught and pace of colonialism and capitalism. Their souls were broken by their captors. They were, and still are, human, not material oriented, communalistic, but slower and less acquisitive. They had no powerful weapons. In addition, open or selective migration was promoted by the ruling cultures, so that the majority rule of democracy finished off the political marginalisation process.

This will not happen to Fijians. We are drawing the line. Some are openly fighting for our beliefs. We do not know yet how many will join in non-violent support. We will wait and see because we do not want a bloodbath and we trust our people and our traditional leaders.

What about our adopted non-indigenous brothers and sisters? They are part of Fiji. They have helped us as they helped themselves over the years and we sincerely hope they will continue to do so. We are basically a very peaceful and hospitable people. We espouse Christian values and we respect all religions. But we have learned the hard way that there is such a thing as giving away too much. We will not give away our sovereignty, our nation, or our souls. We will not allow our culture to be dismissed, absorbed or outpaced. We will do things in our own way and in ways we choose to adopt, because these are the ways we know best and the way we will not be tricked into something we don't want. We reserve the right to bicker amongst ourselves and move slowly without fear of being taken over by a united non-indigenous majority. This has been a problem with our electoral system. This is why many feel that we need a Constitution

that while offering everyone some participation, guarantees us our land, our leaders and our ability to live and operate within our own cultural modalities. Such a Constitution would have to recognise and protect, in perception as well as in legalese, the indigenous rights of Fijians. We will have affirmative action in our Constitution, not in our welfare roles.

I repeat, we welcome and sympathise with our non-indigenous neighbours. We invite and want them to stay, in spite of the current turmoil. They are our friends and they have contributed much to the development of Fiji. They contribute in a major way to our economy. But they must accept our inalienable ground rules. Our own people will lead our own country as long as we have people to lead. And we will not divide our country. We are a difficult people to understand and especially to lead because our customs and traditions are different, and we tend to protect them. We would not wish this difficult task on anyone who is not fully accepted by our people.

As always, we want people who respect our culture, traditions, and language to join us and remain with us. We welcome everyone to our house, but please don't get the idea you own or should be the head of our house. As long as everyone understands these fundamental ground rules, Fijians will be at peace and continue to help bring peace to the rest of the world.

In Fiji we still believe very much in family values and we have roles for all ages, genders and relationships. While we have only recently risen to political prominence, political participation and women chiefs and other leaders have always been with us. There is more work to do. At this critical time, let me just say that I am moved by my heart to join my Fijian brothers, uncles and fathers in support, no matter which side they are on, as we go through this identity crisis as a culture and a nation. Fiji is all we have and we will keep it and maintain our God-given right to share it with whomever we want to when we decide to, without pressure from anyone.

We will protect and share our culture with you. We have our roots and our ancestral homeland. You are all invited to come to Fiji and share our hospitality and friendship. We will welcome you into our homes, our hearts and our hotels. This is part of being Fijian. We are proud of it and we will cherish and protect it always.