

RACE, SPEIGHT AND THE CRISIS IN FIJI

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Race and ethnicity are not identical. In Fiji one suspects no one really cares about this crucial distinction. On 14 May 1987, Rabuka's rhetoric was racial; since 19 May 2000 George Speight's has been even more so. I begin my story with race because my Fiji was primarily colonial and racial. By the time I left Fiji for good in 1974 I had seen only a year and a half of post-colonial Fiji. By the flukes of colonial educational system and scholarship grants I had been in New Zealand and Australia between the mid-sixties and early seventies. Fiji called itself multiracial, never multicultural because it always emphasised atavistic allegiances to primordial difference, not differences that are culturally or socially constructed, as differences based on ethnicity always are. So while Anglo-American anthropologists (among them Australasians) in our part of the world began to redefine the study of cultures, the colonial administration in Fiji clung on to race as an immutable and genetic category. In the end that legacy made it impossible for ethnicity in Fiji to be theorised in anything other than racial terms by the native informants themselves.

As far back as I can recall race was how I was officially categorised although in actual practice, in terms of inter-communal relations, I don't recall ever being rejected by a Fijian on grounds of race. Racial division didn't mean much as we could communicate with Fijians in their native tongue. My father spoke impeccable Fijian and my grandmother — fondly called Adi Kelera by the villagers of Nakelo — spoke it as her native language. To this day when Fijians ask me *'o vaka tikotiko mai vei* ('where are you from?') I reply, as Fijians always do, with reference to the

village or province of my grandparents, in this case the depressed village of Nakelo. Other Indo-Fijians also do this, except those who have lived for generations in urban areas, but even there I can't think of any Indian who would not have connections through their cane-cutter grandparents to a village. Not that Indians actually lived in Fijian villages, their *bastis* or *gaons* simply took on the name of the adjoining village or administrative unit: Yaralevu, Vatualevu, Sawani and so on. But in spite of the symbiosis, the fudging of the absolute categories of race in favour of constructed ethnicities, the official line affirmed divisions in terms of race.

At Lelean Memorial School, the predominantly Fijian Methodist School that I attended, the small minority of Indians were there as representatives of the Indian race, presumably to give Fijians a bit of competition (which never happened because the Fijian students at Lelean were often brighter than us). At Suva Grammar School Indians and Fijians could study for their University Entrance Examination in a class that was called 'multiracial sixth form' because the school was exclusively for people who were Europeans or, like George Speight, part-Europeans or *kailomas*. Times changed, the British left, a post-colonial world order was established but race remained a formidable category and ethnicity undertheorised. In all this, of course, the *kailoma* (literally I suspect meaning children of love, but I am no expert on Fijian etymology) remained ambivalent. At Suva Grammar School they were despised by the Europeans. I recall the Headmaster, Mr Webb, saying to me in his office after he had taken the rather unusual step of naming me a prefect, 'don't be intimidated by the part-Europeans, they are not your equal'. He was alluding to the discipline problems they posed, as I soon found out during lunch-hour detentions. But I had no cause for worry with them. It was the Europeans who never took any directive from me, and simply ignored me throughout my two years at Suva Grammar School.

As for the *kailomas* many were from the sugar mills and were closely associated with the CSR and sugar plantation life because their parents were mill supervisors, engineers and so on. Their surnames were predictable — Williams, Heritage, Lobendahn, Bower, Simpson, Valentine, beachcomber names all. They were good curry eaters, some spoke in Fiji

Hindi (like Billy Heritage and Keith Williams from Nausori) and basically thought of themselves as a separate race. If they had full-blooded Fijian mothers they never spoke about them. As a group their silence was essential because their colonial privileges were based on their silence. And they did very well. They were the middle-level bureaucrats, sugar mill and copra workers, and many were planters in their own right. In the communal constituencies of the colonial government they were classified as Europeans. The Fijians, of course, had no vote until 1963 when between three to five (I forget the exact number) of Fijians could be directly elected to the Legislative Council. Before then all Fijian political representation was through nominations by the Governor and the Council of Chiefs. The Indians had had their communal constituencies for some time, going back to the late 1930s I think.

I thought of the *kailomas* in particular when I heard about George Speight, a name that I initially confused with Spate, author I believe of some important colonial white papers. To understand him is to understand the predicament of the *kailoma* in search of a racial niche denied him by colonial history. George Speight's plight is the plight of the liminal subject (curiously celebrated in postcolonial theory for his hybrid nous) who wants to move to the centre. In this move there is no redefinition of ethnicity (as one would have otherwise expected) but a reaffirmation of the colonial, absolutist category of race. Sitiveni Rabuka used racial discourse, Speight uses racist discourse, and there's the big difference. Colonial discourse was racial, Speight's postcolonial discourses (for he sees his coup as the extension of the uncompleted anti-colonial project of May 1987) are racist. The post-colonial — the post pax Britannica, those nostalgic years of peace — is now linked to the language of racial cleansing (not available when Marxist class analysis was still a valuable alternative to racial categorisation) and the coup seen as the final anti-colonial struggle, albeit against people who have been systematically dispossessed, deterritorialised and for a while after 14 May 1987 effectively disenfranchised. For the *kailoma* to ingratiate themselves into the *tauvei* (the indigenous Fijian, literally the *bhumiputra*, sons of the soil), there has to be excess. Where there are colonial racial division, there has to be racism, where there is casual clothes of all variety, there has to be a return

to the symbolic *sulu* (the Fijian Scottish kilt), where there is urban gait, there has to be village swagger, where there is at least token Indian representation, there can be none (no Indian names are mentioned in the proposed 'civilian' military council either). Speight's father changed his *kailoma* name to a dinky-di *taukei*, as did his mentor Jim Ah Koy. Behind the *kailoma* excess — his establishment *taukei* supporters would have found hostage-taking abhorrent — lies *kailoma* legitimisation. And because in the end, Speight has no village base as such (his life has been urban Fijian and Australian-American), his supporters are really the urban hooligans, the large sea of Raiwaqa (a Suva suburb) unemployed, the vulgar lumpen-proletariat who work at the behest of the reactionary Kubuna Fijian constituency who feel that the Mara-Lauans (with a dash of Polynesian blood) have usurped the power of the traditional chiefs (Melanesians) who ceded Fiji to Britain in 1874. The demands he has continued to make, demands almost invariably structured in the language of a student in a small-time undergraduate American university (Andrews in Michigan, I believe), are absurd in both substance and form. In spite of at times vicious communal rivalry among the Fijians themselves (as we have seen) in Fijian culture, you don't demand that a high chief (like Ratu Mara, the Tui Nayau, ex-President of Fiji) be unceremoniously removed. You take a *tabua* (a whale's tooth) to him and in the middle voice of formal Fijian ask his permission to replace him. It may mean the same thing, but the demand is enacted through a ritual that neutralises antagonistic dialogue. The urban *goondas* of Suva no longer understand the old decorum, as Speight himself, so characteristically, doesn't.

If I were a V.S. Naipaul I would have done my research and written a shorter version of 'Michael X and the Black Power Killings in Trinidad'. Research into the life of Speight — his formative years, I believe 12 in all, in the US and Australia, his failed business dealings, his hubris, perhaps even his pamphleteering and student politics — would have given us an insight into his sick megalomaniac mind. The crusader has no one but himself to advance, which is why the hostage crisis is so surreal, like a scene from the theatre of the absurd. Speight just doesn't make sense, but he gets whatever he wants. To put it another way, Speight makes sense only because he is a *kailoma*. In the end it is his failure to

self-reflect upon his own history that will be his downfall. The excessive demands, the projection of an absurd heroism, his failure to observe *taukei* decorum, *taukei* control, will lead to an even further mockery of the *kailoma* by the Fijian. In bringing shame (*vaka-madua-taka*) to the very people he proclaims to represent, George Speight may bring upon the *kailoma* the very derisory stereotype he applied to the Indo-Fijian.