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The Making of a Capital: A Social History of Suva, 1882–1890

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The previous chapter examined the background and emerging issues relating to the move of the capital from Levuka to Suva. In this companion chapter, we explore how the capital fared in the next decade as Suva and its people responded to the challenge of being the new administrative and commercial centre of Fiji.

XII. The Urban Drift Begins: Toorak and Vatuwaqa

From an official point of view, the big story of 1882 was the final physical move of the government from Levuka to Suva. As the previous chapter shows, the move had been gradual and varying in intensity. In mid-1882, Suva was finally ready to receive the last remaining civil servants from Levuka. The final journey to their new homes in Suva was documented by the *Fiji Times* as follows:

Just before midnight on August 30, 1882, the Governor, the Colonial Secretary, and numerous other department heads boarded the ‘Ocean Queen’ in Levuka for the trip to their new capital.¹

1 Kim Gravelle, *Fiji's heritage: A history of Fiji* (Nadi: Tiara Enterprises, 2000), 163.

While this move was important from a symbolic and administrative point of view, changes in Suva continued at a steady pace, fuelled by a growing flow of migrants. An indicator of the increase in population was the proliferation of waste. The authorities responded by employing ‘scavengers’ to collect rubbish around the town each day, and dump it by Ellery Street, which was then adjacent to the Nabukalou Creek swamp.² Refuse was collected in this fashion until 1893 when the Town Board introduced a new system of removing rubbish by horse and cart:

It will be obligatory on householders to take care that refuse is placed in boxes in readiness for conveyance to the vehicle when the sound of the bell shall announce its arrival.³

Another concern about the rise in density was the risk of fire breaking out and spreading from one building to another. Insurance companies stopped their cover for houses built of ‘native’ materials and a law was soon enacted to prohibit the construction of such houses in the township area.⁴ Within a year, the hybrid *bure* that had characterised so many houses disappeared entirely to be replaced by cottages made uniquely of timber. It is tempting to interpret this decision as discriminatory against the vestiges of Fijian culture or as an attempt to regulate who could and could not reside within the confines of the town.⁵ In fairness however, house fires were common in Levuka and Suva and often caused several buildings to be burnt at once, inflicting considerable losses on all concerned.

Migrants who flocked to Suva were generally of two types. The first could afford to buy land and build houses. The second came looking for work and needed low-cost accommodation. The former consisted of civil servants, merchants and other businesspeople who relocated from Levuka, as well as migrants from abroad (mostly Australia and New Zealand). They paid rates to the Suva Town Board (first established in 1883) and helped in their own way to shape the colony’s capital.

2 Colonial Secretary’s Office (CSO) 2028/1881; all CSO files are held in National Archives of Fiji (NAF).

3 *Fiji Times*, 17 June 1893. Archived issues of the *Fiji Times* are available at the NAF.

4 CSO 2313/1882 and *Fiji Royal Gazette*, Number 17, Volume VIII, 1882.

5 See Frances Steel, *Oceania under steam: Sea transport and the cultures of colonialism, c. 1870–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 181.

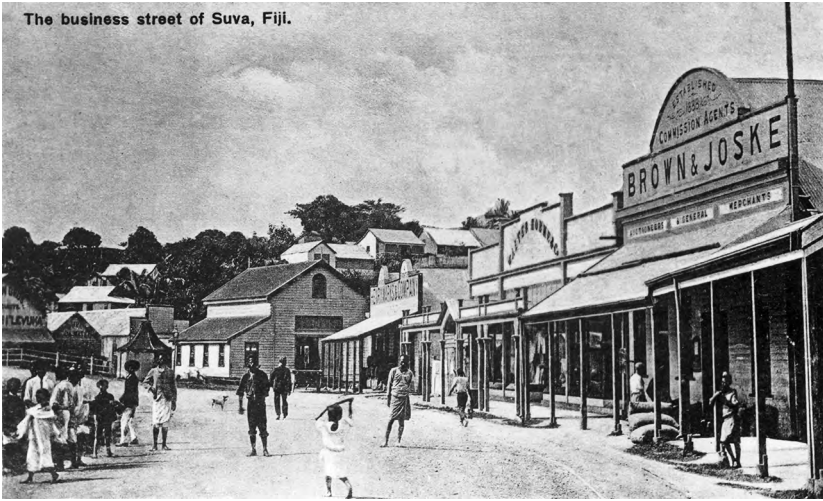


Figure 4.1: ‘The business street of Suva, Fiji’, n.d.

Source: P32.4.14 Fiji Museum.

The latter group, on the other hand, consisted of the verandah-dwelling itinerant labourers from various parts of Fiji, and a growing pool of labourers of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Indian origin whose convergence on Suva is now explored in more detail. It is worthy of note that from 1880, Rotumans also began arriving in Suva in significant numbers because their island was integrated in the greater colony of Fiji. Steel points out that many Rotuman women were in Suva waiting for their husbands to return from the Torres Strait where they worked in the pearl shell industry.⁶ Their early settlement in Suva deserves greater attention from future research.

iTaukei villagers came to Suva in search of work and to sell their produce but also to evade communal obligations. The government was caught in a bind because, on the one hand, it needed indigenous Fijians to stay in their villages to produce taxes while, on the other, it needed their labour and fresh produce to help build and feed Suva. A regulation had been issued to prevent villagers from being absent from their villages for more than 60 days at any one time. However, villagers circumvented it by travelling and living in Suva (and other urban centres) for 59 days and then returning to their village the day before the deadline, only to head back to Suva the following day.

⁶ Steel, *Oceania under steam*, 181.

On arrival, they were branded 'strangers'. This word questioned their legitimacy as residents of Suva and implied that they should eventually go back to the places they had come from. The inference was that Suva belonged to residents who could purchase houses and pay rates: white people. 'Coloured' migrants were thus a challenge to those who wanted Suva to be styled a 'white' enclave. A dispatch from Governor Mitchell to the secretary of state for colonies reflects the unease that prevailed among Suva's European population about the large concentration of Fijian males in the town and that this 'idle body' would become 'dangerous to society'.⁷ Several attempts to repatriate them were made through the 1880s.⁸ Neither Mitchell nor the regulations had much success in stopping this flow. Indeed, many who worked at the wharf openly 'bragged' about being free of communal obligations.⁹

iTaukei women also sought a release from their communal obligations by moving to Suva. Some fled to escape abusive relationships. Others were attracted by the prospects of leading independent lives and finding work to earn a wage, drinking *yagona*, smoking tobacco more freely, and enjoying the excitement and entertainment that the new town promised. Responding to the complaints of several chiefs on the matter, the native commissioner drew up a list of all these 'unmanageable' women with the intention of returning them to their respective villages.¹⁰ The women were mainly from Rewa but several more were from Bau, Koro, Ba, Ovalau, Lomaloma (in Vanuabalavu) and Macuata – that is, from all over Fiji. Many had previously been sent back to their villages but had stubbornly returned to Suva. The Roko Tui¹¹ Lomaiviti feared a veritable exodus and exclaimed, 'if the women in our villages hear that other women can defy the law, the evil-disposed of them will flock to Suva'.¹²

In Suva, these women lived in the company of petty storekeepers, medical students, policemen, European men or Melanesian labourers whom they thought treated them better than their own countrymen.¹³ Several congregated as a kind of sisterhood and met at a house near Nabukalou

7 Despatch 70, 1 June 1887, CO 83/46, Public Records Office (PRO).

8 See CSO 3027/1884, 2715/1885 and 1741/1887.

9 CSO 365/1889; see also Steel, *Oceania under steam*, 177.

10 CSO 2166/1886; see also CSO 1442/1888, and 'Proceedings of a native council or a council of chiefs', 1892, NAF.

11 Provincial governor.

12 CSO 2166/1886.

13 CSO 1442/1888.

Creek they named *vale caviraki*, which a colonial official translated as 'the Kaisi Club'. Their patron was a woman called Sai who welcomed them each night to drink *yagona* until the early hours of the next day.¹⁴

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Melanesian labourers were an integral and essential part of the making of the Suva township. By the 1880s, their numbers began to decline mainly because the demand for labour had been met from India. Ships with Melanesian labourers continued to arrive but frequently. Still, by the mid-1880s, the Melanesian labourers in the country consistently totalled between five and six thousand, of which only 7 per cent were women.¹⁵

They normally worked on the various building and construction sites or on the plantations that bordered the town. On the plantations, they were housed in labour lines and forbidden to venture beyond the borders of the estate. Those who worked within Suva enjoyed a bit more freedom. They were accommodated in the labour depot in Walu Bay or in makeshift lodgings in Toorak. They were generally regarded as hard-working people who endured the harsh working environment and violent treatment often without formal complaints.

They received some protection from the agent-general for immigration. Henry Anson, who occupied the post from 1886 to 1888, was the only official who lived up to this responsibility. He repeatedly denounced planters for maltreating, overtasking and abusing labourers, including those in the vicinity of Suva. He tried to secure land behind the depot so that the labourers who resided there could use it to cultivate crops. However, this was fervently opposed by Thurston who wanted it kept for Suva's new botanical gardens. The disagreement sparked a long feud between Anson and Thurston that culminated in Anson leaving the colony when Thurston was appointed governor in 1888.¹⁶

Melanesian labourers came from diverse cultures. They were mostly from Tanna, Malekula, Santo, Ambrym (for Vanuatu) and Guadalcanal and Malaita (for Solomon Islands). They worked in 'gangs' according to the islands or tribes they came from. They lived peacefully with one another although tensions occasionally surfaced and caused a few brawls.¹⁷

14 CSO 2166/1886.

15 See the 'Report on Polynesian immigration' for 1885 and 1886 in CSO 3849/1887.

16 See CSO 939/1882, containing minutes and reports up to 1887.

17 *Suva Times*, 11 March 1885.

The most serious of them was a riot on 8 March 1885 between close to 50 Ambrym men and 100 Solomon Islanders on the verandah of the Union Bank building. The seriousness of this altercation can be gauged from the iron bars, stones and bottles that were used in the fight.¹⁸ For the most part however, their favourite pastime was to assemble on the weekend to hold feasts, play music (with nose and mouth flutes), sing and dance, sometimes without interruption until the early hours of the morning.¹⁹

A few among them chose to remain in Suva after their contracts expired. However, without land or capital, finding homes was not easy. Government considered some land in Walu Bay, Vatuwaqa (now Suva Point) and Tamavua-i-wai²⁰ but none were deemed suitable. The permanent settlement of these Melanesians in recognisable neighbourhoods such as Flagstaff, Wailoku, Newtown, Namara, Muanikoso, Matata and Kalekana, thus came much later and was arranged mainly by the Anglican Church.²¹

Labourers from India came in much greater number and were generally more amenable to settle in Fiji after the expiration of their indenture. The first Indian indentured labourers to be 'freed' of their indenture were those who had arrived on the *Leonidas*. While some returned to India, several chose to settle in Suva. They took up various occupations around the town mainly as labourers, but also in laundering clothes and selling vegetables.

Much like the Melanesians, they lacked land and capital and were thus forced into tenancy. They first rented from Huon in Toorak where they quickly congregated in communities.²² In 1884, they were thought to number about 80 men, women and children, although that number could swell to about 200 on special prayer or carnival nights when the residents were joined by other itinerant labourers.²³

In November of that year, the colony's chief medical officer, Dr Bolton Corney, visited the hamlets because of concerns about their unsanitary condition. He found nine buildings on half an acre of land, all of them cramped both with lodgers and visitors. Several of the huts had been

18 CSO 719/1885 and 754/1885.

19 See CSO 1689/1886.

20 See CSO 1125/1885.

21 See Winston Halapua, *Living on the fringe: Melanesians in Fiji* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, 2001).

22 CSO 2601/1884.

23 CSO 913/1885.

subleased by the original lessee. They were built of palings, biscuit tins, scraps of galvanised iron and reeds. Sawn timber had been used for the frames. Several had no raised floor or bed-places, and only a mat to cover the earthen floor. Ventilation occurred naturally through the numerous holes and crannies by which air could pass. This disease-prone environment was compounded by toilets that were 'very imperfectly constructed' and an irregular disposal of sewage.²⁴

His greatest concern was the lack of access to clean water. The labourers had dug wells into the ground but the settlement being in a gully, when rain fell, it collected the impure materials from the surface and drained them into the wells, making the water unfit for drinking or cooking. He condemned the wells as repositories of disease that would cause epidemic outbreaks. His report concluded:

I have no hesitation in condemning the well system to which the coolies resort, and I beg to submit my very strong opinion that it ought to be entirely prohibited by a special regulation.²⁵

Bolton Corney also wanted the new regulation to control the construction of huts, water supply, overcrowding, treatment of infants and rubbish collection. These were noble ideals but they did not address the core problem: poverty. Colonial relations of power had reduced labourers' lives to an experience of permanent abject impoverishment.

These power relations soon manifested themselves again in very concrete terms. On 6 March 1885, just over three months after Bolton Corney's initial visit, a group of 16 European residents of Toorak petitioned the Suva Town Board to have the 'Coolie' hamlets and their occupants removed. The petition made reference to the noise generated by religious ceremonies and 'the unearthly sounds produced by the blowing of horns, ringing of bells beating of drums and general shouting' that took place on such occasions. These, they wrote, were a source of 'perpetual nuisance and annoyance to the European residents' and called on the Town Board to 'take steps to remedy this evil'.²⁶ They added:

We would also suggest that the coolie encampments be removed to a distance outside the Town boundaries and we take this opportunity of pointing out that in our opinion this nuisance

24 CSO 2601/1884.

25 CSO 2601/1884.

26 CSO 913/1885.

is only in its infancy and as the number of time expired coolies will increase every year they will eventually flock to the centres of population.²⁷

Clearly, the European residents of Toorak wanted to keep their neighbourhood 'for whites only' and the petition aptly reflects the prevailing ideas about race among colonists at the end of the nineteenth century. They favoured the compartmentalisation of ethnic groups in separate neighbourhoods. In this case, racist ideas converged with 'good sanitation' to give their request a semblance of moral rectitude.

Within a mere four days of receiving the petition, the Suva Town Board had produced a report on the Toorak hamlets. It gave credence to the petitioners' claims and supported their call to have the occupants removed. Some of its findings were probably exaggerated to shock the government into action. Nevertheless, other observations are useful to us in that they offer a rare insight into the labourers' lives and their struggles to eke out a living after the expiry of their terms of indenture.

The houses were reported to be 'most miserable', overcrowded and unfit for human habitation. In a 10-by-5-foot hut with walls that were just 5 feet high, the officer found huddled together two men, two women, two boys and a 10-day-old baby. The kitchens were more satisfactory. Built adjacent to the main entrance, they ensured that the smoke from the fire could flow into the main living areas and thereby ward off pests and mosquitoes. Goats and fowls roamed freely outside among a few plots used for the cultivation vegetables and root crops. The report concluded that more huts were in the course of being erected.²⁸

Responding to the report, Anson did not object to the removal of the Toorak families, but he wanted a guarantee that a suitable long-term alternative was ready to accommodate them. A number of options were presented, including an area near the headwaters of the Nabukalou Creek (the area between Toorak and Flagstaff). This idea was quickly abandoned because of the risk of pollution for the residents living downstream. The back end of Walu Bay was another suggestion, as was an area east of Leveti Creek (between Nasēsē and Veiuto). The latter had a good supply of water and was distant enough 'from the residences of the white population' and yet near enough to the township for labourers to walk to work.²⁹

27 CSO 913/1885.

28 CSO 913/1885.

29 CSO 1030/1885.



Figure 4.2: Plan of the proposed Vatuwaqa settlement, 1887.

Source: 15 August 1887, CSO 1965/1887.

The preferred site, however, was a government-owned 131-acre stretch of land near the signal station at Vatuwaqa. It was considered ‘near enough for a coolie town to be permitted’, and ‘not too far for the bodies to walk in from’.³⁰ Several individuals complained that the relocation would be

³⁰ CSO 1125/1885.

too expensive and that in any case it was too far from the places where they worked and shopped. The government believed these costs would be more than compensated for by the extent of land to be gained and by improved sanitary conditions.³¹ Several families conceded and moved to become the first settlers of what we now call Suva Point. A plan of the area (below) suggests that Melanesians might also be relocated to this area, though no confirmation was found that any of them settled there.

When Anson visited them in mid-1887, the new settlers seemed pleased with the location. 'Their property and resources are scanty,' he reported, 'but they express themselves contented and seem to have no fears as to their prospects.'³² Of the 24 blocks available, 22 had been cleared of trees and bush and 18 had houses built on them. Most families had planted crops on their sections including corn, yams, kumala, beans, taro, cassava, mustard, Chinese cabbage, potatoes, radish, bananas and pineapples. Some raised goats and chickens and one enterprising man owned a boat while another had purchased a cutter. Wells had been dug to access fresh water, though doubts persisted about the suitability of this water for drinking. On the whole, it appeared as though a climate of 'goodwill and harmony' prevailed in the settlement.³³

Nevertheless, the new residents requested government action on two matters. The first was a piece of common land they desired to let their goats and cattle feed. This was approved and the community began using the heavily wooded area adjacent to the settlement (the current site of the Vatuwaqa cemetery). The second was the clearance of a path to Suva. As no road to the township existed, those who worked in or carried their produce for sale to Suva were forced to use the shore and walk around the peninsula to reach their destination. Their movements to and from Vatuwaqa were thus regulated by the tide. The commissioner of lands advised that improving the rough track to 'the flagstaff' would cost upwards of £100.³⁴ In the end the decision was made to build a road from Vatuwaqa to Nasova (in Nasēsē). This road was completed in 1890.³⁵

31 CSO 1125/1885.

32 CSO 1866/1887.

33 CSO 1866/1887.

34 CSO 1866/1887.

35 See *Fiji Times*, 24 September 1890; see also CSO 108/1890.



Figure 4.3: Map of the town of Suva and adjoining lands, 1889.

Source: 19 February 1889, CSO 466/1889.

While some families moved to Vatuwaqa, several more remained in Toorak. They took on labouring jobs, worked in laundering and tried hawking. A few managed to open stores on the margins of the central business district while a few more made a living from operating gambling dens.³⁶ These illegal multicultural dens became popular with a great number of iTaukei, Melanesians, Indians and Part-Europeans and suggest

36 CSO 2721/1890.

by their existence and popularity that attempts by the government and the Suva Town Board to regulate and discipline the non-European sections of the community were never completely successful. In a kind of subversive disorder, attempts to regulate ethnic relations were often disrupted, impeded or ignored by the people who came to live in the new capital.

Festivals were also popular and brought the neighbourhood to life irrespective of the religion its residents professed. In spite of them fostering a strong sense of community and hope, they were perceived as dangerous by the government and in the late 1880s, it stopped issuing permits for religious processions through the street of Suva, claiming that they endangered public peace and that, as had happened in Trinidad, they might become the source of riots and loss of life.

As more labourers completed their terms of indenture and moved to Suva, they were steered into areas that could be farmed. One such area was the well-watered, low and flat tracts of land to the north of the Vatuwaqa River.³⁷ Within a decade, Vatuwaqa had grown into a fledgling agricultural community and was considered a town in its own right. The *Fiji Times* described it as a 'beautiful sight' especially when its 'extensive fields of rice' were 'waving to the fresh breeze of Laucala Bay' (6 April 1898). Areas of land were also opened up for farming in parts of Samabula, Nasinu and Wainadoi. The Wainadoi move was one of the first experiments of labourers from India seeking lease agreements with indigenous landowners.³⁸

XIII. The Administration of Justice ... and Coercion

For those labourers who were under indenture, Suva was the centre for the administration of justice. In Henry Anson they had one of very few colonial officials who listened to their grievances and offered protection and redress from the violence and other injustices they encountered on the plantations. However, to meet and be heard by Anson, the labourers needed to walk the 10-mile path to Suva. On 3 May 1886, for instance, several gangs of labourers at the plantation in Koronivia (Lower Rewa)

37 See CSO 758/1890.

38 CSO 3174/1887.

organised a strike, with at least 40 of them deciding to walk to Suva with their spades, hoes, knives and other implements to get real justice from the Immigration Office. Anson being on leave, they met with the acting agent-general, Dr Bolton Corney, and complained to him about being overworked, underfed, abandoned by plantation inspectors and ignored by the magistrate at Rewa.³⁹ After being promised that their grievances would be looked into, the labourers agreed to be escorted back to Koronivia by the police.

They continued their strike as they waited for an inspector to visit. On the evening of the third day, a group of 70 of them escaped from the plantation and again set off to Suva to seek relief from the acting agent-general. They returned only after further assurances were made that an inspector would shortly be sent. The inspector arrived on 13 May and found the workers 'sullen and unwilling' and their quarters in 'filthy and unhealthy condition'. Many were so poor that they could not earn enough to buy their rations.⁴⁰ In spite of being witness to these disturbing scenes, the inspector advised that discipline and punishment should be stepped up to prevent a recurrence of the disorder. Under no circumstances, he advised, should groups of 100 men ever march off their estate in such an unceremonious fashion.⁴¹ Other officials, including Bolton Corney, concurred and warned that 'unruly assemblies' were becoming too common, that the prevailing 'spirit of insubordination' should be quashed immediately, and that 'a law must be drawn up to punish those who engage in such activities'.⁴²

Ordinance XIV of 1886 was speedily drafted by Thurston, now acting as governor, and passed into law.⁴³ In his view, Indian indentured labourers were 'a working population and nothing more'.⁴⁴ The ordinance was described as 'Draconian' by the Colonial Office in London⁴⁵ and would have probably been fiercely contested by Anson, had he been in Fiji when it was enacted. Its most important clause was the prohibition of more than five immigrants from leaving their plantation in a body for the

39 CSO 1107/1886.

40 CSO 987/1886.

41 CSO 987/1886.

42 See CSO 987/1886 and 1107/1886.

43 See CSO 3061/1887.

44 See CSO 1380/1894.

45 See KL Gillion, *Fiji's Indian migrants: A history to the end of indenture in 1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 83.

purpose of making a complaint.⁴⁶ This was a major victory for employers for it rendered virtually impossible any organised collective action such as labourers' marches to Suva.

Only one other such march to Suva ever took place, when about 130 labourers from Nausori plantation appeared at the agent-general's residence on 6 April 1887. They complained about being overworked, underpaid and frightened by a gun-wielding overseer.⁴⁷ After getting assurances from Anson that one of his staff would support them and attend their court hearing, they agreed to return to work. However, on the day of the hearing the officer could not secure a boat to get across to the court house at Naduruloulou. Consequently, six of the marchers' representatives were convicted under the new ordinance and sentenced by the magistrate (Joske) to two months hard labour. Anson was left fuming and described the whole affair as 'a travesty of justice', for he had promised the men a fair hearing.⁴⁸ As pointed out by Brij Lal, such examples demonstrate that the colonial state in Fiji seriously absolved its role as trustee of indentured labourers' rights.⁴⁹

Indigenous Fijian and Melanesian labourers also availed themselves of legal avenues in Suva to seek redress. Those employed on smaller islands wrote letters and petitions to complain variously about inhuman treatment, overtasking, unpaid work, insufficient or bad food, work on Sundays, unhygienic lodgings, poor sanitary conditions and insufficient medical care. On Mago Island, 87 petitioners signed a letter of complaint against their manager, Borron, and had it carried by boat by their own representatives all the way to Suva.⁵⁰

In similar fashion, three Solomon Island labourers absconded from an estate in Bureta on Ovalau and sailed to Suva in one of the plantation boats to lay their complaint. This decision was taken in desperation after their grievances were repeatedly ignored by the local magistrate. Like the Mago labourers, they accused the plantation management of forcing them to work on Sundays without pay, feeding them insufficient food and beating them regularly. The sick were forced to work even in the rain and no one was allowed to wander beyond the plantation boundaries even in

46 See CSO 3061/1887.

47 CSO 87/921 and *Fiji Times*, 9 April 1887.

48 CSO 921/1887.

49 Brij V Lal, 'Veil of dishonour', in *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji*, ed. Brij V Lal (Suva/Canberra: The Fiji Museum/Australian National University Press, 2000), 174, doi.org/10.22459/CJ.12.2012.

50 CSO 3256/1895.

their own time. Like the Mago representatives above, the three absconders were arrested on arrival in Suva but later released after the conditions of their employment were revealed. The new agent-general for immigration, Arthur Robert Coates, noted that 'had these men not come to Suva, the illegality to which they were subjected would have continued'.⁵¹

If Suva represented labourers' hopes of obtaining recourse from injustice, the capital was also the centre from which the state operated its coercive apparatus. A large prison had been built in which numerous indentured labourers served sentences for various infractions of the labour ordinances. Many who served sentences 'with hard labour' were quickly sent out to work on public infrastructure projects. Some labourers preferred prison to plantations life and thought they might escape incarceration by paying their fine to the jailer and then earning money in Suva for the rest of their sentence. As the agent-general remarked, labourers knew that Suva did not have an agent for planters, and several stayed on in the town after the completion of their prison term and stayed with free immigrants where they were occasionally joined by deserters fleeing other plantations.⁵²

Suva's prison also held indentured women, most of whom were punished for desertion or unlawful absence from work. Records from the superintendent of prisons indicate that in May of 1887, there were 30 women in Suva's jail, only four of whom were Indian indentured women.⁵³ Two years later, the number of female prisoners had grown to 57, almost all of whom were indentured women.⁵⁴ This can be partly explained by a 10 per cent increase in the population of women labourers. It can also indicate that they were particularly targeted because they were the most vulnerable. On the other hand, it may also mean that indentured women became increasingly combative and difficult to manage or that, like some of the menfolk, they thought that enduring a prison term in Suva might be better than the ongoing violence and exploitation of plantation life.

However, some women quickly found that life in prison was not necessarily safer. One such woman, Mahadai, was raped by the chief warden of Suva jail while serving a six-week term for unlawful absence from work. Her case came to light when it was reported by an iTaukei inmate. When asked why she had not lodged the complaint herself she replied 'because I did

51 CSO 3490/1894.

52 CSO 1107/1886.

53 CSO 1089/1887.

54 CSO 2042/1892.

not know how to make a complaint' and 'because we get no redress'.⁵⁵ Exceptionally, one or two of the female prisoners would be bailed out by 'free' labourers living in the vicinity of the capital and then employed in prostitution.⁵⁶ These women may have reasoned that the opportunities for earning income and for safer working conditions were greater in prostitution than in plantation work.

One of the many prisoners who was incarcerated at the Suva jail in the 1880s was Moses Dukumoi – more popularly known as Navosavakadua. A leading priest from Drauniivi in Ra, he was jailed for his part in leading the Tuka uprising, a mass movement in the Ra province and the interior of Fiji.⁵⁷ After his arrest in Vunidawa in December 1885 along with several of his lieutenants, he was brought to Suva and sentenced to 12 months with hard labour for *vakatubuca* or 'conduct calculated to raise evil in the land'.⁵⁸ He was kept under constant supervision and allotted a European cell to ensure that he would not communicate with any other prisoner.⁵⁹

A list of offences he committed while serving time impresses the danger with which he was regarded. On 16 May 1886, Navosavakadua was placed in separate confinement with reduced diet for four days 'for singing'. In response to this offence, Thurston ordered the superintendent of prisons to place Navosavakadua in leg irons. On 14 July, he was placed in solitary confinement for 48 hours after being found conversing with another inmate. On 10 September, he was found in possession of half a sheet of foolscap and eight pages of the *Town and Country Journal*. For this offence, he was placed in solitary confinement with reduced diet and without a bed for four days. A week later he was found speaking to another prisoner outside the bathhouse. Both were flogged.⁶⁰

In spite of these draconian measures, Navosavakadua's presence in Suva continued to inspire Tuka. When his prison term ended, the colonial administration was tempted to exclude him permanently from Fiji. This was endorsed by the chiefs at the *Bose Vakaturaga* (Council of Chiefs

55 CSO 1842/1887.

56 *Journal of the Fiji Legislative Council* 1885, Paper 25: 13, NAF; and CSO 3061/1887.

57 See Martha Kaplan, *Neither cargo nor cult: Ritual politics and the colonial imagination in Fiji* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), doi.org/10.1515/9780822381914, and Robert Nicole, *Disturbing history: Resistance in early colonial Fiji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), doi.org/10.1515/9780824860981.

58 Mitchell to Secretary of State for Colonies, 19 October 1887, Despatch 137, CO 83/46, PRO.

59 CSO 599/1886.

60 CSO 1939/1886.

meeting) of 1887. They resolved that Navosavakadua was a 'monomaniac' and that they were of one mind about the man: 'Let him now be sent far away; to Rotumah if possible.'⁶¹ Ordinance 20 of 1887 providing for 'the deportation and confinement of Disaffected or Dangerous Natives'⁶² was immediately drafted and enacted, and the man they called a 'dangerous fanatic'⁶³ was shipped to the furthest and most isolated island of the colony: Rotuma. He lived there until his death on 13 June 1897, just four months before the expiry of his confining order.⁶⁴

XIV. Socio-Economic Life

Meanwhile, on the commercial side of things, the central business district of the new capital took shape and grew steadily through the 1880s. Filled with the imperial pride of the times, Gorrie declared triumphantly:

We have seen the green knoll where a small wooden church once stood levelled and rolled out into a pier; a native path along the beach raised to the dignity of Victoria Parade; the tidal swamp at the mouth of the creek reclaimed, and its square yards fought over as choice town sites ... Where a few years ago the native canoe alone was seen, or a solitary settler's boat coming up to the solitary store for a few tins of preserved meat and a case of gin, three (if not already four) first-class steamers per month from the Australian Colonies now load and unload their cargoes.⁶⁵

Streets were named after the key figures of the empire (Victoria, Carnarvon, Gladstone, Kimberly, Macarthur), the colony (Gordon, Thurston, Pratt, Goodenough, Gorrie) and the town (Thomson, Renwick, Joske). This is not to say that they were perfectly aligned and clearly defined. An article from the *Suva Times* suggests that they existed nowhere except on the map:

Indeed on the plan, Suva appears to be a neat and picturesque town, well laid out; with a creek running through the centre of it, and a broad beach extending in front. We see that Gordon Street and MacGregor Road, and others, all so carefully traced out, that we might be forgiven for expecting to find names engraved at the

61 Resolution XI, 'Notes of the Proceedings of a Native Council', 1887, NAF.

62 *Fiji Royal Gazette*, 13 October 1887.

63 Mitchell to Secretary of State for Colonies, 4 July 1887. Despatch 97, CO 83/46, PRO.

64 CSO 2550/1897.

65 John Gorrie, 'Fiji as it is', *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* 14 (1882–3): 160.

corners, and the houses duly numbered. But, as everyone knows, the reality is very different. The unfortunate pedestrian flounders though mud and slips over soapstone; and in many places would have great difficulty in telling whether he were on the street or off it.⁶⁶

Traffic began to proliferate with sulkies and buggies – respectively two and four-wheeled vehicles pulled by horses – keeping Suva’s streets busy. From the mid-1880s, parts of the town were laid with rails and in 1886 tramways ran through such streets as Pier Street, Victoria Parade, Pratt Street, Scott Street, Thomson Street and Renwick Road. They delivered cargo from the wharf to the many businesses that had sprung along these streets. The tracks were entirely under the control of indigenous Fijians and Melanesians, but as a new and yet unregulated mode of transportation, it was thought to be ‘highly dangerous to foot, horse, and vehicular traffic’.⁶⁷



Figure 4.4: Cumming Street under construction, 1876.

Source: P.32.7.26 Fiji Museum.

66 Cited in Albert J Schütz, *Suva: A history and guide* (Sydney: Pacific Publications, 1978), 15.

67 CSO 1843/1888.

Accidents became more numerous but mainly because of the large number of horses that roamed freely in the centre of the city at all hours of the day and night. Reporting on the seriousness of the matter, the *Fiji Times* wrote:

Attention must be again directed to the nuisance existing in the town by the straying and wandering of horses in all directions ... At night, when the lights are not shining very brightly, one is very apt to run or bump against the heels of some fiery untamed heed, and each has really been the case.⁶⁸

Stray dogs and cattle were also problematic. To combat the problem, the government issued a regulation stipulating that all dogs be registered.⁶⁹ On poultry, the *Fiji Times* warned that Suva's wild chickens were now under threat from a new predator:

It behoves the owners of poultry in Suva to look after them with greater care than hereto as the lively mongoose has reached us. These little vampires are spreading rapidly all over this island and won't trouble themselves to hunt rats while chickens can be so easily got at.⁷⁰

In the end, a pound was ordered built and a pound-keeper hired to capture and enclose Suva's stray animals but even this measure had little impact on the problem.

Meanwhile the ownership of horses grew to such an extent that the townsfolk formed a jockey club. The general public was shortly entertained with horse races first at Albert Park in the early 1890s, then at low tide on the Muanikau sands, and finally on a proper racecourse at Veiuto in the late 1890s. The residents also organised other sporting events, such as the Easter program which was held at the Albert Park where a small pavilion had been erected.

According to the *Fiji Times*, these meets were attended by a great number of spectators as well as nearly every vehicle and horse in the community.⁷¹ The athletics events included sprints, long jump, high jump, skipping for girls, obstacle races and other games such as sack races, egg and spoon races, and three-legged races for younger children. A tug of war between

68 6 February 1889.

69 *Fiji Times*, 20 February 1889.

70 3 September 1890.

71 *Fiji Times*, 5 June 1889.

the residents of Suva and Rewa often provided the climax of the day.⁷² Tennis and cricket tournaments were held each weekend at the same venue, often against the Rewa teams. Competitions between these two districts gave birth to a long sporting rivalry that persists to this day.

Another attraction was the Suva saltwater swimming baths. The process by which they came into existence was highly contentious. An impassioned debate raged through the late 1880s about whether ‘coloured people’ (as non-Europeans were called) should be allowed to swim in the same area as ‘white people’. In 1888 the Suva warden (mayor), Simeon Lazarus, and the Suva Town Board attempted to prohibit ‘Indians, Natives of Fiji, and Polynesians from using the baths’.⁷³ Their draft ordinance also proposed the hours of 10 am and 4 pm were to be reserved for ‘ladies’ only, and that dogs and the washing of clothes were prohibited.⁷⁴



Figure 4.5: Queen Victoria Memorial Hall, time of Fiji Agricultural Industrial Show, 1908.

Source: Wishart Ryan, P32.4.84 Fiji Museum.

⁷² See for instance the *Fiji Times*, 3 April 1889.

⁷³ CSO 1017/1888. The term ‘Polynesians’ was commonly used to refer to all Melanesian labourers.

⁷⁴ CSO 1017/1888.

After due consideration, the government advised that the Town Board had no power to make such ordinances and the proposal was rejected. In 1890, Lazarus and the Town Board amended their request and proposed that 'whites' should bathe on the planned site (see below) while a separate bath should be built 'say near Walu Bay' for the 'coloured races'.⁷⁵ His argument was that Suva's European residents contributed more rates and taxes to cover the cost of these baths and they should therefore enjoy the better facilities.

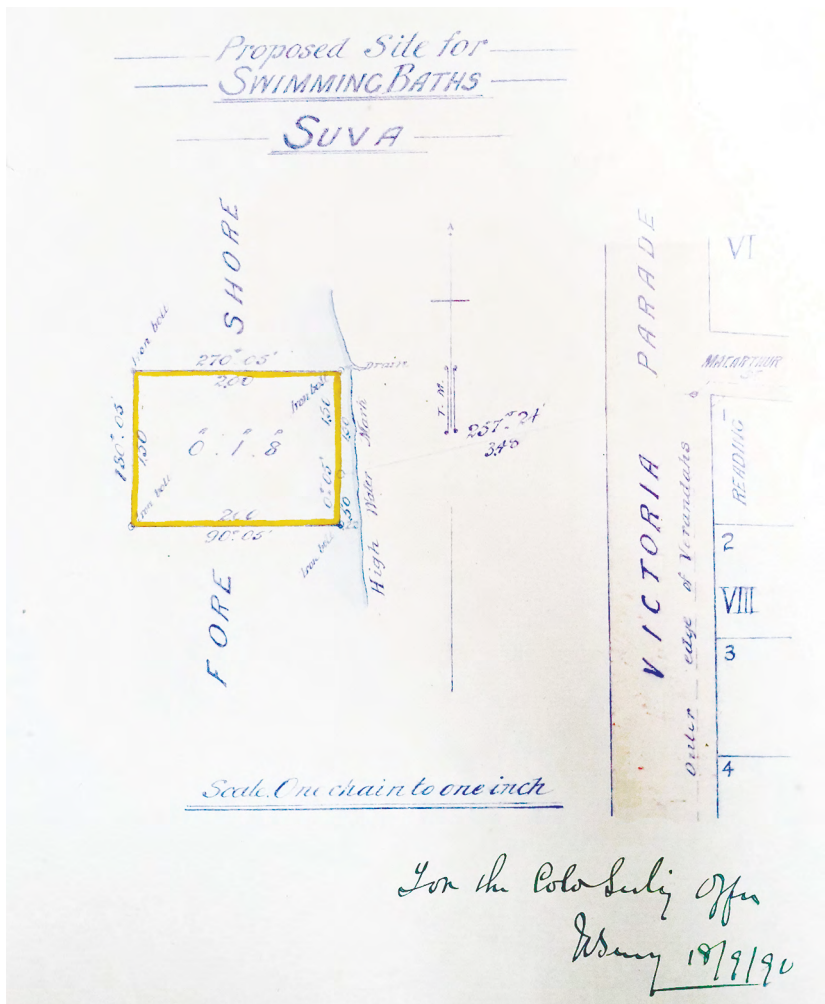


Figure 4.6: Proposed site for swimming baths – Suva, 1890.

Source: 18 September 1890, CSO 2129/1890.

75 CSO 1017/1888.

The government again opposed it and advised the Town Board that because the baths were public, they should be 'open to all persons' and that 'Indians, Natives of Fiji, and Polynesians have as much right to use them as anyone else'.⁷⁶ The baths were eventually opened to the public in 1891 as a saltwater pool near the current site of the Suva Olympic Pool. This contest reflects the counteracting forces that existed within the larger system of colonial power in the allocation and regulation of space for various ethnic groups. It also shows that the colonial administration did not always make common cause with the narrow interests of certain European settlers.

However, on other matters the government could be more repressive and regimenting. For instance, in 1892 it regulated singing, dancing and other expressions of culture with a Native Dances Ordinance that prohibited all *meke* or ceremonial dancing and singing within town boundaries without a permit. A curfew was also imposed between 11 pm and 5 am for 'Indians' and all Islanders, whatever their origin.⁷⁷

The late 1880s produced several other interesting developments. One of them was the installation of the first telephone line between Government House and the Colonial Secretary's Office in March 1886.⁷⁸ A few kerosene lights helped to brighten a handful of streets for a few hours each night. And then, a novelty of a different kind lit up the streets when a wandering barber appeared on the scene. Commenting on this welcome sight, the *Fiji Times* wrote:

One often hears of a Wandering minstrel [sic] but a wandering barber is a novelty, yet one is to be seen in Suva trampling from house to house, with the usual paraphernalia of looking glass, scissors, razors, etc. This tonsorial artist is an intelligent Indian and carries references as to his qualifications. With such a tradesman in our midst there need not be any more rough chins or unshorn locks and his arrival can be hailed as a great convenience.⁷⁹

Also, a market for the sale of produce was finally completed in 1890. As the *Fiji Times* observed, indigenous vendors could now 'rejoice exceedingly' at the prospect of occupying the new buildings and thus 'escape from roosting under ivi trees and verendahs during the wet cold nights'.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ CSO 1017/1888.

⁷⁷ Ordinance 3 of 1892; see Steel, *Oceania under steam*, 181, 182.

⁷⁸ CSO 642/1886.

⁷⁹ 9 February 1889.

⁸⁰ 27 September 1890.

Fiji's first Annual Exhibition also came into existence. Organised by the Agricultural and Industrial Association of Fiji, it brought together products from all over the colony and handed out prizes for the best crops, flowers, animals and other miscellaneous goods. The best products were then selected for exposition at other British imperial exhibitions including the centennial exhibition of 1888–1889 in Melbourne.⁸¹

Meanwhile, efforts to link Suva to Rewa and other settled areas continued in earnest. In July 1889, between 30 and 50 men began work on a 3-mile long unmetalled road 'for horse and light wheeled traffic' from Samabula to Suva. Lobbied for by prominent Samabula planters, this road replaced a small track that took pedestrians an hour to walk before reaching Suva.⁸² It would join the Waimanu Road 'at the bridge on the Walu Creek above the waterfall'.⁸³ Signs of this waterfall and of another on Nabukalou Creek have all but vanished. The disappearance of these old natural features of Suva remind us of the many other such markers that were erased in the last 150 years in the name of 'development'. Meanwhile segments of the road to the Lower Rewa were also under construction, including the section passing through Kalabu village. To facilitate travel by two-wheeled vehicles across the many rivers that lay between Suva and Rewa, bridges were ordered erected with buabua logs sourced from Kadavu.⁸⁴

XV. The Pebble in the Shoe

Our period of study ends with a return to the enigmatic and controversial figure of the Tui Suva. After supervising the removal of his people to Suvavou in 1882, Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya's relationship with the Colonial Government quickly soured. He found himself in trouble for drinking alcohol and was then punished for *daudara*, when he attempted to molest the wife of a man he was staying with in Rewa. Writing on this matter, one official conceded, 'I feel Ratu Ambrose is almost past praying for'.⁸⁵ He was subsequently banished to Fort Carnarvon in Natuatucoko in the interior of Navosa with his wife, and stripped of his title of *buli*.⁸⁶

81 See for instance the *Fiji Times*, 16 October 1889.

82 CSO 107/1890.

83 CSO 108/1890.

84 CSO 1805/1890.

85 CSO 1345/1882.

86 CSO 1675/1883.

However, his incarceration did not have the desired outcome and in 1884 he was arrested for procuring and supplying liquor and for other 'immoralities' with certain Bauan women on the estate of the Rewa Sugar Company at Koronivia. Commenting on the case, Ratu Ilaitia Toroca, an old Bauan high chief, remonstrated that were it not for the protection of the law, 'there would have been bloodshed as in former times', for one of the women was the wife of a chief from Lasakau, the powerful clan of Bauan sea-warriors.⁸⁷

Ratu Aporosa was sentenced to a fine of £50 or six months imprisonment with hard labour. He appealed to the governor about the severity of his sentence but Des Voeux was resolute and instructed the native commissioner to ensure that the people of Suva did not help him pay the fine.⁸⁸ After serving his sentence, he faded somewhat from public view before making an ominous return in 1890.

This is not to say that Ratu Aporosa was inactive. He was making good money from the flourishing banana trade. He was also supplying logs to private individuals and to the government for the construction of a substantive wharf. Free to pursue his own interests, he did not hesitate to use his customary title to divert his people from their tax work and to redirect their labour to serve his own business ventures. Hence, as in 1879, this situation made the collection of taxes very difficult. By 1890, in spite of making 'considerable sums of money' as one colonial official put it, the people of Suvavou were behind with the in-kind payment of their taxes.⁸⁹ As much as the *buli* tried to get people to meet the tax threshold, his efforts were constantly thwarted by Ratu Aporosa's interference especially in the matter of log cutting. His junior position relative to Ratu Aporosa in the traditional hierarchy dictated that he must not undermine the latter's prestige and authority.

Another matter of concern for the administration was his continued abuse of women. His conduct in this regard was described as 'a perfect nuisance to all' and 'a scandal to the whole community'.⁹⁰ One Matelita, a Nacokaika woman, wrote to the colonial secretary to seek government protection against Ratu Aporosa. She complained that he came and took her whenever he wished and kept her against her will. However,

87 CSO 1671/1884.

88 CSO 1671/1884.

89 CSO 700/1890.

90 CSO 2182/1890.

she would not lay charges against him because of his rank and neither would his wife. Although the government seemed keen to prosecute him, the two women's refusal to proceed against him allowed Ratu Aporosa to escape punishment.⁹¹

The government's troubles with Ratu Aporosa continued into the latter months of 1890 when he intervened in the affairs of Suva on a point of economic justice by spearheading the first Suva dockworkers' strike. The strike was linked to industrial action by dockworkers in other parts of the world. In Australia, the shipping companies refused stevedores' demands for better wages and both sides determined to fight to the bitter end. As a result, much of the shipping ground to a halt. Fiji was affected in so far as it was dependent on shipping for its imports and exports. Real fears surfaced that Fijian fruits (especially bananas) would end up rotting on the wharves of Suva and Levuka for want of ships. Many in Suva were also worried that the town might be starved of Australian goods and products.

The battle lines between workers and employers extended to Suva through two brief but dramatic events. The first was when the *Wainui*, a ship sailed by a unionised crew, arrived in Suva in early September 1890 at the same time as the *Pukaki* and its non-unionised labourers. When alongside one another, the *Fiji Times* reported 'there was some ornamental language indulged in by Unionists against non-unionists which culminated in the flinging of such missiles as potatoes and onions'.⁹²

A month later, the lead article in the *Fiji Times* began with the words 'strikes are in the air'.⁹³ The rest of the article reported on an attempted strike by 60 iTaukei dockworkers who had been hired to discharge the trading ship SS *Rockton* that had docked at the Suva Wharf. A man named Timoci Nagusa⁹⁴ was said to be at the origin of the strike and had told his fellow workers that Australian stevedores were striking for increased pay and that 'as the ships could not be worked without the men the owners would have to give in'.⁹⁵ He encouraged them to strike for an increase of pay from 2 shillings to 4 shillings a day. About 40 of the men followed his advice.

91 CSO 2182/1890.

92 10 September 1890.

93 4 October 1890.

94 There are conflicting reports about whether he came from Ra (*Fiji Times*) or from Nadi (CSO 3088/1890).

95 *Fiji Times*, 4 October 1890.

Although colonial officials were certain that Ratu Aporosa was 'the prime mover in the whole affair' and that he was 'at the bottom of the trouble', Nagusa's statement to the police indicates that the dockworkers had been planning the strike for at least two weeks.⁹⁶ During that time a number of them, including several from Suvavou, had pledged not to work for any of the steamers for less than 4 shillings a day. When the steamers *Arawata* and *Taupo* left Suva in late September, they met at Suvavou to seek Ratu Aporosa's blessing, as Tui Suva, and resolved that when the next lot of steamers arrived they would stop work or accept work only on their own terms.⁹⁷

Ratu Aporosa was a well-known figure at the wharf. He had developed a close affinity with the dockworkers, notably through his draught-playing skills for which he had acquired the reputation of being unbeatable.⁹⁸ With his support it was decided that a group of strikers would go on board the next cargo ships and *tabu* them (prohibit them from working). Regardless of whether the workers were of iTaukei, Melanesian or Indian origin, they were to stop work and get off the ships or be *buturaki-ed* (beaten).⁹⁹ Ratu Aporosa's son, Ratu Ravulo (sometimes spelt 'Ravula'), was to represent his father at the wharf and attest of the Tui Suva's approval of the strike.

The plan was executed to the letter. Ratu Aporosa's men arrived at the wharf as the stevedores prepared to unlock the *Rockton* and told them to stop work until Ratu Aporosa had arranged for better wages. Taking leadership for the strike, Nagusa pointed to Ratu Ravulo whose presence was sufficient to persuade the workers. The customs officers tried to get Nagusa arrested but the only constable on duty, Ratu Joshua, seemed to approve of the strike and refused to take him into custody.¹⁰⁰ Nagusa was eventually arrested and the strike was stopped in its tracks, probably because the scheme had been kept secret and failed to get the endorsement and solidarity from all dockworkers. Nagusa was sentenced to six months hard labour in default of a fine of £50.

While Ratu Aporosa was suspected of being the head of the movement, he escaped punishment. He returned to prominence in 1897 when he supported Nakelo villagers in a dispute they had with surveyors of the

96 CSO 3088/1890.

97 CSO 3088/1890.

98 Adolph B Brewster, *The hill tribes of Fiji* (London: Seeley, Service & Co. Limited, 1922), 206.

99 Beaten up. See CSO 3088/1890.

100 CSO 3090/1890.

Native Lands Commission.¹⁰¹ A year later, he embraced the Seventh Day Adventist faith in a further symbol of nonconformity and dissent. That same year (1898) he led a group of eight Suvavou elders and confronted the government with a written submission expressing their dissatisfaction with the £200 that villagers were getting in compensation for their move to Suvavou.¹⁰² In 1900 and 1901, he was one of the main leaders of the Fiji-wide movement that sought constitutional change in Fiji by advocating federation with New Zealand. Described by one colonial official as ‘an agitator of the worst type’, he was arrested on 20 November 1901 along with the Bauan chief Ratu Savenaca Radomodomomo and confined to Oneata for two years.¹⁰³ On his return from exile, he was appointed *buli* of Rewa and worked in that capacity for the last six years of his life. He succumbed to typhoid fever in December 1912¹⁰⁴ and thus ended the life of one of the colony’s most colourful characters.



Figure 4.7: Ratu Aporosa and Adi Kelera, n.d.

Source: Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

101 CSO 4573/1897.

102 Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The method of hope: Anthropology, philosophy, and Fijian knowledge* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 37.

103 See CSO 1546/1902 and 2678/1902.

104 *Fiji Times*, 10 December 1912.

Conclusion

This and the previous chapter explored the making of Suva as the capital of Fiji by piecing together some of the fragments of that history. A range of components were considered including wealth and poverty; mobility and settlement; capital and labour; race relations; the exercise of power, coercion, violence and brutality; the organisation of resistance and protest; the management of space and infrastructure, of transport and trade, and of justice; and the many expressions of culture, religion, food, sport, leisure and so on. This broad approach reveals the rich and unique texture of Suva's early colonial history.

Amid all the fragments and details raised in the chapter, a few overarching observations can be made. The first is that the spectre of history continues to hover over Suva in the present. For instance, the thorny issue of the original ownership of Suva was back in the news recently when the government announced plans to use a small part of the former native reserve to build the new Indian High Commission.¹⁰⁵

The second is that a journey into the history of a place throws up old markers and how they were replaced by new ones. For example, Suva village gave way to Government House and the Thurston Gardens. Waterfalls gave way to roads. The beach disappeared when it was reclaimed to build hotels and other high-rise buildings. The mangroves and woodlands were cut. New streets were laid where swamps had previously laid for hundreds of years. Logs were felled all the way to Nausori, Naitāsiri and Namosi by colonised and colonists alike to feed their enormous appetite for cash and for material to build the town and its infrastructure. History marks change across time. In this case, this chapter gives us a sense of some of the things that were given up in the name of progress. Whether these changes are judged useful or detrimental to society is contentious but worth thinking about as we consider how we want the city to develop in the next 20, 50 or 100 years.

The third is the pivotal importance of the port in the choice of capital. To create an economy that was oriented to fulfil the interests of the empire, effective maritime communication was always going to be vital. Viewed in the larger global economic context of expanding trade

¹⁰⁵ See Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, *Parliamentary debates*, 15 February 2019.

networks to Australia, New Zealand and beyond, the chances of the original inhabitants of Suva holding on to their ancestral lands were quite remote. These chances were eroded further by the involvement of their own chiefs (Ratu Cakobau and Ratu Aporosa Tuivuya) in brokering deals that facilitated their dispossession, even if they (chiefs) negotiated under duress.

The fourth is that the project of building the capital was directed and managed by colonial elites. However, they were always dependent on the labour and skills of thousands of ordinary people of all ethnicities. These people came to Suva, made it their home, and proceeded to give Suva its rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Amid the thousands of people who participated in the making of the capital, a few extraordinary characters emerge. One of them is the Tui Suva. His leadership, independent spirit, flaws and misdemeanours, and his constant defiance of the colonial order, make him one of the more colourful and enduring characters of this period and suggest that drawing a more complete biographical portrait of the man will be a worthwhile endeavour.

Fifth, as they moved into Suva, migrants encountered the regulatory and disciplinary power of the colonial state. However, the state's attempt to impose its colonial order on the bodies, spaces and activities of the colonised was never completely successful and varied greatly over time, place and circumstance. Some weaknesses were internal to the state itself, such as the colossal task of building a capital with very limited funds. Another challenge was the shortage of labour. That the transition was a rather messy affair is also illustrated in the irregular and misaligned streets of Suva and in the many stray animals that roamed the town. The Levuka lobby, the numerous petitions, the many delays caused by the sickness and protests of labourers, the wrangles with the Tui Suva, the housing crisis, all suggest that the making of the capital was often interrupted, disrupted, undermined and contested. That is, ordinary folks often disregarded the various attempts that were made to control and discipline their lives, movements and settlement.

Finally, this chapter suggests that many more stories about Suva lie in the archives. They contain more of the minutiae of life that ordinary folks left in their wake. Their notable and less notable drama, their grand and not so grand accomplishments, their comical and more tragic experiences all call for renewed interest and rediscovery.

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