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Swimming under the *Ivi* Tree: Ratu Sukuna Park, Land Reclamation and Family Connections

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The farther backward you can look
the farther forward you are likely to see
— Winston S Churchill

My favourite early memory of Suva was swimming under the *ivi* tree opposite Vanua House, along Victoria Parade, where Ratu Sukuna Park is today (see Figures 13.1 and 13.2). The year was 1955, some seven or eight years before the park was established.¹ The land reclamation that resulted in the park was part of the grand plan to develop the Suva waterfront from the current port area, along Thomson Street and all the way along Victoria Parade. In the 1880s, Thomson Street crossed Nubukalou Creek and was the main waterfront.

1 Ratu Sukuna is the affectionate form of the longer version: Ratu Josefa Vanaaliali Lala Sukuna. On being knighted twice, he was popularly referred to as Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. The school named after him carries the latter as Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna Memorial School (RSMS). This chapter continues to use the affectionate version given to the park.



Figure 13.1: The ivoi tree (1959). The ivoi tree in the middle of the picture stands in front of what is Vanua Arcade today. The sea is now part of Ratu Sukuna Park.

Source: National Archives of Fiji.



Figure 13.2: The ivoi tree, from where McDonalds restaurant is today (1959). Part of the Cable & Wireless Building can be seen to the right of the picture.

Source: National Archives of Fiji.

In retrospect, while the idea of a recreational area for the capital might have been part of the grand civic plan, the naming of the park after the great chief, however, was necessarily an upshot of history. Had not Ratu Sukuna died in 1958, the park may not have been so named.

The reclamation continues today past the Grand Pacific Hotel, the Suva Bowling Club green, the Queen Elizabeth Drive Park and beyond.

In my moments of reverie over the years, I have always looked back at how Suva City has grown and developed. I have pondered particularly about that swim under the *ivi* tree and asked myself whether, apart from my fellow swimmer and myself, how many others have had the opportunity to have swum there before the sea became land and well before the park was first conceived. In retrospect, we were perhaps making history – swimming into Suva's history.

This chapter is similarly predisposed regarding its approach. It is a narrative that focuses essentially on the general historical development of Suva and by way of parallelism, for instance, narrates its corresponding impact on aspects of my own family history including my community. Inevitably, I become both a narrator of history and a consequential participant in some aspects of it as it evolved. But more so, I become selective of issues through circumspect restriction but ensuring coherence and palpability of the story.

The Approach

In *History is a weapon*,² the unnamed writer opens with: 'History isn't what happened, but a story of what happened'. They later elaborate and qualify that it is not only about the story that happened but also of 'the lessons these stories include'. The narrative below comprises my story. The lessons that can be drawn would, by necessity, be pivoted around my own experience. This necessitates therefore the use of additional primary sources of information³ and of the autonomy of my own interpretation.

2 See *History is a weapon* (website), accessed July 2019: www.historyisaweapon.com.

3 These include family archives and the internet. See especially my blog: Kaliopate Tavola, *Kaidravuni*, www.kaidravuni.com.

The latter agrees with the conclusions drawn by British historian EH Carr in *What is history?*⁴ Further, the approach proffers autoethnography⁵ as its mode of disciplined scientific study.

Carr also characterises history in terms of cause and effect and concludes that ‘everything has a reason’. In this context, I have introduced two related metaphors to demonstrate the relations between cause and effect and the reasons why these happened. I have used the concept of ‘arrow of time’ to underline, firstly, the relational aspect between cause and effect, and the direction of the relations. Secondly, I have used ‘parallelism’, not as a literary device, but as a means of demonstrating cause and effect as corresponding features. Each section of the paper reflects such correspondence.

Carr raises two more conclusions. He sees history as progress, which widens horizons. This story aims to demonstrate the progress and development of Suva being reflected in my own history and that of my community. In terms of widening horizons, the story itself, in the way it is conceived, goes beyond the conventional way of recording history. It proffers the observer himself in the act of observing ‘so that man is simultaneously the subject and the object of thought and observation’.

The Chronicle from the Late Nineteenth Century: 1882–1888/1889

In Suva, during this period, Thomson Street was the main waterfront street. What is Victoria Parade today was essentially the coast, lined on the seaside with magnificent raintrees that provided welcome shade for citizens and their horses.

While the official move to make Suva Fiji’s capital was made in 1882, the decision relating to that had been done earlier in 1877. In that year, Suva administrators had agreed to a township plan and passed Towns Ordinance No. 16 of 1877, which provided for the establishment of a partially elected Town Board. The work of the board was further assisted by Ordinance No. 4 of 1881: An Ordinance for Regulating the Alignments of Streets in the Town of Suva. This marked the start of civic planning control. The board sat until 1883.

4 Edward Hallett Carr, *What is history?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

5 See Margot Duncan, ‘Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art’, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3, no. 4 (2004): 28–39, doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300403.



Figure 13.3: Victoria Parade, n.d.

Source: P32.6.27 Fiji Museum.

The original plan of the township envisaged the construction of a pier extending out from the mouth of Nubukalou Creek in a north-westerly direction, following the creek's line of flow. However, this was found to be inconvenient, since many of the business houses were situated in the area of Thomson Street and Renwick Road. Ease of access presented a problem.

The subsequent decision to situate the wharf close to the business houses led to early reclamation work in 1881, along Thomson Street, where the General Post Office is situated (site of the old Suva Post Office). The wharf was constructed there. Pier Street was thus named appropriately due to its proximity to the wharf.

Near to the wharf, a local marketplace had developed there and was popular for those sailing in with their produce. Passengers wanting to board ships in the harbour would congregate under the *ivi* tree at the corner of Thomson Street and Renwick Road (the Ivi Triangle today) for their boat transfer services.

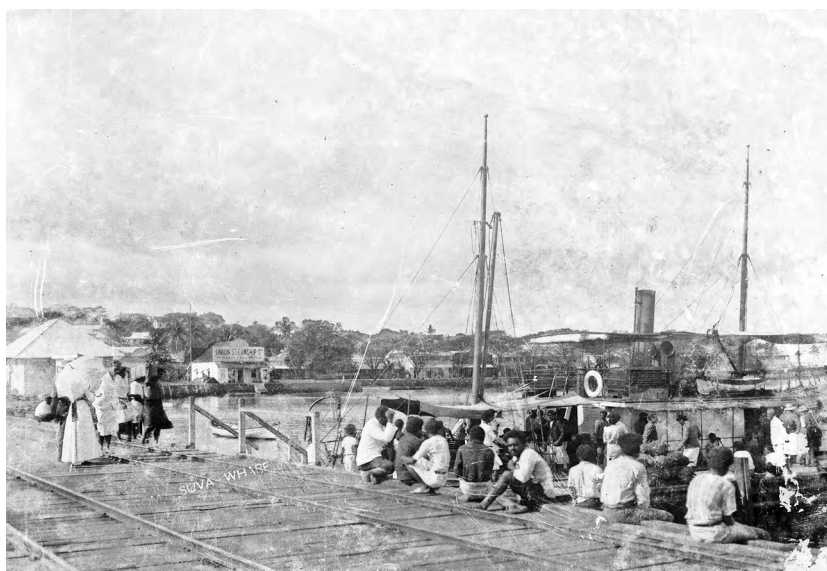


Figure 13.4: Suva wharf, n.d. In the background next to the Union Steamship Company store is the same *ivi* tree.

Source: P.32.4.51 Fiji Museum.

Out to sea and beyond Suva Harbour, the volume of ships to and from Suva was definitely on the rise, reflecting the development of Suva as Fiji's capital and trading port. The construction of Solo Lighthouse⁶ in 1888 in the middle of the North Astrolabe Reef, at the northern end of the Great Astrolabe Reef, 65 kilometres south of Suva, was a vital navigational aid for mariners.

The land reclamation that led to the construction of the wharf in 1881 along Thomson Street was only the beginning of many reclamation projects to permanently change the Suva shoreline. The reclamation that would give rise to Ratu Sukuna Park, however, was still some 70 years away.

The beaming light from Solo Lighthouse within the Great Astrolabe Reef was a great sensation for the villagers on Dravuni Island, 13 kilometres away. The sensation was one of fascination. In the first place, it reaffirmed their expectation that by making Suva Fiji's capital, there was bound to be unprecedented development taking place there and from which they

⁶ See Sea Reel Productions, *A mariner's guide to Fiji shores & marinas* 2019 (Suva: Sea Reel Productions Ltd., 2019) for background including the legend behind the rock on which it sits. See also Tavola, *Kaidravuni*, for other related stories.

would benefit. Dravuni's 'arrow of time', from their perspective, was thus established. The villagers could relate to the lighthouse, a great symbol of development that they could see. Its beaming light promised more. The direction of the benefit flow, totally unprecedented, was from the new capital, the centre, to the periphery.

This heightened the villagers' sense of anticipation as to what else was on offer. In this exalted mood, it was easy for them to imagine the legendary promises of the past from ancestors who lived on Solo and to whom homage is still offered today.

In 1888, the village on Dravuni was situated on the south-eastern part of the island, facing away from the new lighthouse. The villagers could not see the lighthouse nor Solo's light at night directly since the central ridge running the length of the island was in the way. They keenly awaited nightfall when they would climb to the top of the ridge to enjoy the light display from the new lighthouse.

This fascination was not transitory either. It lasted a long time. Further, it planted a seed of enquiry in the minds of the villagers on the practicality and justification of the location of the village. Villagers were aware that with increased traffic from the capital, it was wise to move the village site for convenience and logistical expediency. In any case, such a move in a similar direction was not unprecedented in the context of the village history.

Prior to 1800, the village site had moved from its south-eastern location to the northern end of the island, Muanalilai, facing Viti Levu and Suva of yesteryear. The reasons for that move remain today as an issue for self-reflection and self-discovery. This is particularly so since the move proved disastrous when in 1800 *lila balavu*, Asian cholera, killed many villagers, who had to be buried in mass graves. The villagers lacked natural resistance to the imported scourge. The end result was an immediate return to the previous village site. This lasted more than eight decades before the Solo Lighthouse and Fiji's new capital beckoned for another move.⁷ That move came after 1888.

⁷ For details on *lila balavu* and its impact on decision to move village site, see *Kaidravuni.com (blog)* – History: 'The village site changed with time', accessed July 2019.

For the villagers, the move was ‘in the wind’. Their rising expectations, elicited by the proximity of the new capital, were yielding dividends. The shift to the new site coincided with the visit of Rev. Eliesa Bula⁸ of the Methodist Church of Fiji. He carried out a mass baptism on a plot of land within the demarcated village precinct. He commemorated his visit and his divine work by naming that particular plot of land, Vitiri, after his *tokatoka* in Somosomo Village, Gau, Lomaiviti.

Two village elders, including my great-grandfather, had given up their *kanakana*, family owned land intended for garden plots, for the village site. When his son was born in 1889, my great-grandfather was already on posting as a Methodist catechist in Nabukelevuira, southern Kadavu. Grandfather Livai Veilawa was destined to play a role with Ratu Sukuna (born a year earlier) in the next section of this story.

The Chronicle from a 30-Year Period: 1889–1919

Suva’s growth as Fiji’s capital was better planned compared to that of Levuka.⁹ The city fathers made sure of that. A critical part of that plan was of course land reclamation. Substantial land reclamation took place during this period.

The focus of land reclamation at the time was the seaward side of Thomson Street. By the onset of the current period of study, the focus had shifted along to what is Victoria Parade today, even though the reclamation work along Thomson Street had not been completed.¹⁰

In the 1900s, land reclamation started on sites to accommodate the Cable & Wireless building and the Suva Town Hall. Any reclamation along the intervening shoreline from the beginning of Victoria Parade (end of Thomson Street) to the new reclamation site that was to accommodate, inter alia, Ratu Sukuna Park, was not part of the civic plan at the time. Two small hills nearby were removed and the soil from them used for the reclamation.

8 See Kaliopate Tavola – *Kaidravuni.com* (blog) – History: ‘The unstoppable march of Christianity’, accessed July 2019.

9 RA Derrick discussed Levuka’s haphazard development in Derrick, ‘The removal of the capital to Suva’, *Transactions and Proceedings of the Fiji Society of Science and Industry* (1953): 203–9.

10 The reclamation seaward from the GPO was still underway in 1959 – see Negative No. M1318, National Archives of Fiji (NAF). Subsequent to that, all old reclamations were encircled by new reclamations to gain more waterfront land and the foreshore line shifted to Stinson Parade.



Figure 13.5: Victoria Parade, n.d.

Source: P.32.7.32, Fiji Museum.

The Suva Town Hall was completed and opened in 1905. Its original name was Queen Victoria Memorial Hall. The town hall remained as Suva's finest building for many years.¹¹ It served another purpose at the time. It initially housed the Fiji Museum that was founded the year before in 1904, the same year when the first elected and nominated 19-member Legislative Council was established. The museum finally moved to its permanent building in Thurston Gardens in 1954.

The reclamation further progressed southward to accommodate the building of the Suva City Carnegie Library, which was opened on 20 November 1909. Governor Sir Everard im Thurn, who assumed office on 11 October 1904, officiated at the opening. He also donated books to the library. A further donation of books came from Sir Alport Barker, then proprietor and publisher of the Fiji Times and Herald Limited.

The planning of the library had started on 1 September 1908 when Andrew Carnegie, an American iron and steel manufacturer, provided the grant that enabled the completion of the central portion of the library building. But the library did not start on a good footing. Its roof was blown off by a hurricane on 25 March 1910. Other changes to the library were to follow.

Land reclamation continued in the 1910s. However, the approach this time around was different. It took place on both sides of the Nubukalou Creek – northwards to Walu Bay and further southward along Victoria Parade. Between 1911 and 1913, reclamation took place to the north of the creek for the new Kings Wharf and the old Public Works Department depot. This allowed the work on the new wharf to start in 1912. It was a wooden structure that serviced Fiji and the Pacific region for nearly 50 years before major renovations in 1961 and 1982. Major renovations still needed further land reclamation and this was carried out between 1913 and 1916. Apart from accommodating the renovation work on the Kings Wharf, the reclaimed area also accommodated development on the Walu Bay industrial site.

11 Other buildings were a close second: e.g. the Sacred Heart Cathedral – consecrated in 1885 and completed in 1902.

The period 1911–1913 also saw reclamation work further along Victoria Parade, the site of the Grand Pacific Hotel (GPH). The soil used for this reclamation came from removal of a hill nearby, ‘backing the greensward of Albert Park’.¹² The hotel was built by the Union Steamship Company in 1914 to serve the needs of passengers on its trans-Pacific routes. It can be imagined that, at the time, there was still much unreclaimed foreshore-line to walk or to ride a horse to get to the new hotel from the business end of Suva. Suva citizens from the business end of town used to complain about the hotel’s remoteness.¹³

The work of reclamation, however, did not abate. At about the same time, late 1910s, there was reclamation at the beginning of Victoria Parade, along Central Street of today. The site eventually accommodated the Central building – the CMLA building of today.

In 1917, Suva Grammar School for boys, located near Suva City Carnegie Library, was built after the completion of land reclamation, which followed the decision to establish the school. The school officially opened there on 8 July 1918. This historic building has seen many changes over the years. It later became St Stephens Boys Hostel or St Stephens House/Building. Still later it housed the government’s Electronic Data Processing Services. At one time, in the first half of 2000, it was planned to accommodate the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation but that came to nought. The plan for the future is to convert this heritage building to Fiji’s first National Gallery of Contemporary Arts.

By the onset of World War I, Suva had been Fiji’s capital for more than three decades. It was by and large in an adequate state of readiness to respond to the call of duty. Ratu Sukuna in particular, then in his late 20s, played great leadership roles during this time, earning for himself national and international recognition.

12 A post from an online forum stated that this hill was higher than those two knolls removed for the reclamation for the Suva Town Hall and Cable & Wireless building: maskedman, ‘Savage world’, Karate Resource forum, 10 December 2005, karateresource.proboards.com/thread/337.

13 See maskedman, ‘Savage world’. These complainants would have felt aggrieved if they had had to walk to nearby Thurston Gardens that opened in 1913, a year before the GPH. There were hardly any motor cars in Suva then. See *Fiji Times*, 7 January 1905 for the story of the first motor car to land in Fiji. On 31 January 1914, the *Fiji Times* reported an observation by Adolf Brewster, a British colonial administrator, who remarked how when he left Fiji in 1911, there were no ‘land motors’ or cars in the country.

The capital's unifying essence was formed from celebrations of its growth in all aspects – civic, infrastructural, social, economic and political – and was tested by the unprecedented demands of World War I. It responded with remarkable alacrity, carrying the country to glory in the defence of country and king. This was so despite the anxieties of the war, a rumoured attack by a German cruiser (17 September 1914), curfews, news censorship, exodus to safer locale, price inflation, family losses and even the racial selectivity of soldiers to the war fronts.¹⁴

Altogether, Fiji mobilised three contingents under the Fiji flag.¹⁵ But a large number of personnel, including non-Europeans (indigenous and Indo-Fijians) were mobilised through other country's forces, such as Britain, Australia, New Zealand (including the Māori Battalion), India, South Africa, East African (sic), Canada and America. Fiji soldiers fought in 10 theatres of war, namely France, Turkey (Gallipoli), Mesopotamia, Egypt, Palestine, North Sea, India, Russian Armenia, the African campaign, and even here in the Pacific when 10 Fiji personnel joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in August 1914 to invade Samoa, then a German colony.

The team spirit and common bonds that led to this enthused participation were pervasive. Suva and Fiji communities – different tiers of the communities – rushed to play their parts in the war efforts. At first people readily gave financial contributions that were disbursed to London. Later, communities, including provinces, gave cash for specific purchases for

14 See 'Life continues as normal', *Fiji News Herald*, 4 August 1916. It did however list the difficulties and losses experienced and 'for those of us who have lived through this war vicariously from these distant shores, life has remained much the same as it was before the war started'. It added: 'Among Fiji's ordinary inhabitants in the villages and on plantations, life goes on. Villagers are still busy producing taxes for the government and servicing the needs of their chiefs and the church. Indentured labourers continued to toil on our sugar plantations to make this colony profitable.'

15 The First Fijian Contingent, 56 personnel, sailed to Europe aboard RMS *Makura* on 1 January 1915. The men were farewelled at a lunch at Suva's Club Hotel and hosted by the Hon. Henry Marks, a member of the Legislative Council. The call for a more active participation in the war effort quickly found voice in the council where advocates called for the raising and equipping of units for service at the Front. The council then passed the relevant resolutions. The men of the First Contingent fought in Flanders and Somme (Belgium and France). Some joined the Kings Royal Rifle Corps. The Second Fijian Contingent left the following July. The Third Fiji Contingent, which departed Suva on 14 August 1918 on board RMS *Niagara*, only got as far as Auckland when the war ended. They were on their way to Egypt. The contingent's enlistment was done in joint arrangement with the NZ Expeditionary Force. The contingent arrived back in Suva on 11 December the same year. The men of this contingent did not qualify for war gratuity.

the war efforts or in kind. Others gave personnel or made other offers that were declined.¹⁶ Citizens readily volunteered for the country's self-defence.¹⁷ And Suva's women did not disappoint.¹⁸

Of all Fiji's contributions to World War I, those by Ratu Sukuna himself and by his brainchild, the Fiji Labour Corps (FLC), were perhaps the most thought-provoking, giving one a comforting feeling of contentment. Ratu Sukuna's rejection by the British Army after taking leave from his law study at Wadham College, Oxford University, and his subsequent enlisting in the French Foreign Legion¹⁹ is legendary. But more so are his citations for bravery during his short sojourn with the Foreign Legion and being awarded the highest honour, the *Médaille militaire*.

He returned home wounded but he had already conceived the idea of the FLC for indigenous Fijians in a non-combat World War I role. It was at the FLC the Dravuni's 'arrow of time' was directed this time around. But that was consequential to the initial pull of the capital as a haven for employment opportunities.

By 1914, Livai Veilawa was 25 years old but had not lived on Dravuni since birth. His father had opted to live instead in Naqara, Ono Island, Kadavu, his wife's village, after his posting as a catechist had ended. Like many others, Livai saw World War I and related economic activities in Suva as an opportunity to find work. The freedom to leave one's village for work purposes permitted by the Colonial Government at the time was an incentive as well.²⁰

Livai found work at the Suva Wharf as a stevedore. He responded to the national call to enlist for the FLC. He passed the medical test at the Drill Hall in Suva where enlistment took place, as well as the subsequent

16 On 15 August 1914, leading Indo-Fijian leaders petitioned the governor to give them training in the defence of Suva.

17 A Fiji Defence Force was formed: members of Fiji's rifle clubs were mobilised as part of the force and were seen performing military drills on the Suva foreshore.

18 *Fiji News Herald* (commemorative edition, date unavailable): 'We also acknowledge the many women who have joined the local force as volunteer nurses. We remember that several of them were on standby when the New Zealand Expeditionary Force invaded Samoa last year.' (They were trained at the Suva Hospital in readiness to treat casualties from the invasion of Samoa).

19 Ratu Sukuna enrolled in the First Battalion of the French Foreign Legion on 8 January 1915.

20 Brij V Lal, for example, discusses the status of the Fijian labour laws relating to the Fijian Labour Ordinances of 1905 and 1912 and the resultant freedom of movement within the colony. Brij V Lal, *Broken waves: A history of the Fiji Islands in the twentieth century* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), 27–28.

selection²¹ to reduce the number since many had passed the fitness test.²² His brief experience as a stevedore would have helped his selection, given the task FLC was to carry out in Europe. Despite having not lived in his village, he received the villagers' and provincial blessings when these were sought.

The villagers' acquiescence was unexpected, from the family's perspective. On reflection, however, there was obviously much to credit the underlying factors prompting Dravuni's 'arrow of time'.

Training and drills followed the final selection. In the meantime, the choice of the final destination for the FLC came through. It was to be Calais not Basra. The latter was declined for reasons that it was undesirable due to 'unhealthy conditions and climate'.

When it was time for departure for Calais, there was the farewell on 18 May at the GPH with speeches galore, photo calls and the march through town to the Suva Wharf. The FLC departed for Europe on 19 May 1917 on board a steamer.²³ The travel route was via Honolulu, Vancouver, then overland by train to the Port of Liverpool on the eastern coast of Canada, and thence to Calais, France.

21 *Fiji Planters' Journal*, May 1917 (available at the National Archives of Fiji): 'The Contingent consisting of 100 natives which are being sent to France sometime this month to assist in transport work is now being selected. It seems a pity that these fine men should be used as non-combatants only, and there is really no valid reason for supressing that they will not fight as well and endure the climate etc; as well as other coloured races who are at present doing good work in the trenches.'

22 At the Drill Hall, more than 100 Fijians passed the medical test. Only 100 were required. Selection therefore was needed and a committee was formed on 29 March 1917. Sir Henry Marks, who donated £10,000 for the formation of the FLC, was a member of the committee. Selection got underway on 3 April 1917. Those selected were known as the 'Marks Boys' in recognition of this contribution. Sir Henry Marks was a member of the Legislative Council and the managing director of Messrs Henry Marks & Co, and his contribution went towards 'raising, equipping and transporting FLC to and from France and for paying the separation allowances of dependents of men' selected. Other contributions included £50 from Apolosi Nawai of the 'Viti Kabani'. The 100 men selected had to be supported and endorsed by their traditional communities. Since discipline and solidarity were important, Ratu Sukuna selected 15 traditional chiefs to keep the peace. Broken down by provinces, Kadavu provided the majority – 26 per cent altogether. Others were Tailevu – 23 per cent; Cakaudrove – 18 per cent; Lomaiviti – 9 per cent; Naitasiri – 5 per cent; Rewa – 5 per cent; Ba – 4 per cent; Lau – 3 per cent; Ra – 3 per cent; Bua – 2 per cent; Serua – 1 per cent; Nadroga – 1 per cent. Livai Veilawa, under the FLC list was at No. 62 and recorded as having come 'from the island of Kadavu'. 'Na Mata' printed the list and recorded Livai Veilawa as from Dravuni, Ono, Kadavu. In trying to assist the European officers to pronounce and understand Fijian names, Ratu Sukuna gave each name an English translation. Livai Veilawa was recorded as 'Veilawa – a cross, such as is made by the intersecting the stripes of a pattern (as on a mat)'.

23 The *Fiji Times*, the next day (20 May 1917), wrote: 'They have gone. The officers and men of the Fiji Native Transport Contingent, who have become popularly and almost affectionately known as "Marks Boys" had a send-off worthy of the occasion, except that the rain came down too heavily at times to be comfortable. Still, rain has almost come to be inseparably associated with public and other functions in Suva, so that it can be said there was really nothing wanting to complete the success attending the departure of the boys on their long journey to do their bit for the Empire.'



Figure 13.6: World War I parade near the Ivi Triangle.

Source: P32.7.12 Fiji Museum.

Between 1917 and 1919, the FLC worked the docks in Calais, Marseilles (southern France) and in Taranto (southern Italy). The men of the FLC made an impression wherever they were. England's King George V visited them in France. World War I ended at 5 am (GMT) on 11 November 1918. But the FLC was still needed for postwar demobilisation efforts and did not get back to Suva until October 1919.

Ratu Sukuna was 31 years old then – a war veteran, a national hero – and the glittering acclaim and illustriousness that he amassed and that the country and the people of Fiji have attached to his name were becoming self-evident. The park that was to commemorate this high chief however, was still over four decades away.

Dravuni's 'arrow of time', in relation to Fiji's capital, Suva, in the first part of the story, can be said to have benefited the whole community. This time around, the choice is personalised. The beneficiary was Livai Veilawa, a Dravuni villager, my grandfather. The choice, additionally, is momentous in that Livai was able to make the connection to the great Fijian chief in whose memory one of Suva's favourite parks was named – a naming that is historically significant. Furthermore, it is significant in

the overall context of this story, for example, by being subsequent to ‘that swim under the *ivi* tree’; it also plays out that metaphorical ‘swimming into Suva’s history’.

In the next part of the story, in the three decades following the end of World War I, Dravuni’s ‘arrow of time’ was to involve the whole community once again.

Suva Witnessed Progress, War and Peace: 1920–1953

While new land reclamations continued to shape and configure Suva’s physical and civic developments, the sea and shoreline that was to become Ratu Sukuna Park remained unreclaimed. Other infrastructural developments during this period arose from existing reclaimed land. Suva’s development proved resilient despite unexpected natural disasters; and the country’s engagements in World War II did not seem to hinder civic and national development either. When Suva was proclaimed a city on 7 October 1953, it was ready to greet the newly crowned Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II during her coronation visit before the year’s end.

Progress was marked at the onset of this period by the demolishing of the old Queens Wharf off Pier Street, built in 1881. The demolition was necessitated after the completion of the new Kings Wharf on the north side of Nubukalou Creek in 1912²⁴ and took two years, 1921–1922.

A form of demolition that also took place in 1921 was due to nature’s wrath. Lightning struck Government House, causing extensive destruction. It took seven years to rebuild it (by 1928).²⁵ Destruction was

24 The location of the new Kings Wharf built in 1912 on the northern side of Nubukalou Creek proved to be inconvenient for the bulk of the businesses that were still located in Thomson Street and Renwick Road area. The inconvenience explained why, when the wharf moved north, the old Customs House near the old Post Office remained at its old location well into the 1950s, its location being considered very central by businesses in the town. It took a while for businesses to relocate nearer the new wharf. The first to build near there was Burns Philp in 1930. The Suva Market was delayed also: from near the old Post Office at the old Queens Wharf, the market first moved to Cumming Street for 20 years, then to its present site in 1948/1949. W.R. Carpenters Store soon moved in nearer the new wharf, after Burns Philp.

25 The first Government House was built in 1882. The original building was a simple wooden bungalow. The site was the original village site of Nakorobaba. The new design was a replica of Government House in Colombo, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), a crown colony then.

also wrought by fire in Cumming Street in February 1923.²⁶ A devastating hurricane struck Suva in 1952²⁷ and this was followed in September 1953 by an earthquake²⁸ and tsunami a couple of months or so before the royal (coronation) visit.

Progress also came in other forms. In 1935, drainage work started at the site of the Government Buildings. The site was once the flowing waters of a creek. The foundation stone for the building was laid in 1937 and building finished in 1939. A new wing was added in 1967.

Land reclamations that started from the first part of this story continued during this period. There was still work to be done and more shoreline to be reclaimed. Adjacent to the shoreline that was to be Ratu Sukuna Park, on the side where McDonald's stands today, was the site next to be reclaimed, in the 1920s. The Bhanabhai Building was subsequently built there. This housed Suva's fire station at one time. The sea gap between the reclamation discussed above and that along Central Street and on which the CMLA Building stands today was reclaimed between 1936 and 1939. The Regal Theatre Building stands there today.

In 1923, however, more reclamation was needed next to Suva Grammar School, on the site of the Fiji Development Bank Building today, to accommodate a new playground for the increasing number of students attending that school. Later in the 1930s, the school building itself was extended seaward, taking up more previously reclaimed land in the process. To cater for the increasing school roll in the 1940s, more temporary buildings were needed and these were sited on reclaimed land between the school and the GPH.²⁹

26 The fire destroyed most of Cumming Street. Since colonial times, the street had been a vibrant shopping area. Early tourism started there. An earlier fire in Suva was recorded in 1891.

27 The hurricane damaged many wooden buildings in the section of Victoria Parade between Pratt Street and Gordon Street. Two hotels were damaged. Others damaged included the Central Building and the Fiji Times Printery. All had to be rebuilt. In quick succession, modern concrete buildings were erected to replace the old wooden ones. They included the Garrick Estate Block, the Queensland Insurance Company's block of shops in Victoria Parade and the new Club Hotel.

28 Redevelopment after the earthquake included the dilapidated *Fiji Times* replaced by the Sabina Building. This contained a shopping block. The Miller and Prasad Buildings filled in the intervening gap as far as the Fiji Trading Company Building (built by *Fiji Times* proprietor Sir Alport Barker in 1948). Further south, the Bhura Building (1950s), Dahia Building (1953) and Central Trading Company (1956) were put up. A building erected by the proprietor of the Golden Dragon and the Housing Authority joined the old Whan's Construction Company Building (Automotive Supplies) erected on the old sugar mill site.

29 Students used to refer to the site where temporary buildings were built as the 'reclamation'. It was the space that was later occupied by the Fiji Travelodge. In the 1950s, Boys Grammar School and Girls Grammar School discussed merging and relocating to a single site. The ideal location suggested by the Board of Education was Veiuoto, Nasēsē. The school moved there in 1960.

Development during this period also included building on existing reclamation, even going right back to land reclaimed in the 1880s on the seaward side of Thomson Street. The Westpac Bank Building we see today on 1 Thomson Street and which serves as its Suva branch was built in 1934.³⁰

In a space of nine years (1939–1945 and 1952–1955) during this period, Suva and the country were again mobilised for war efforts. In World War II and in post–World War II (the Malayan Campaign), like World War I before them, the response was overwhelming. Fiji mobilised for the Solomon Islands Campaign (1942–1944) and for the Malayan Campaign (1952–1956),³¹ not forgetting of course the Territorial Force³² for national defence.

Apart from the facilitations that Suva ably provided in both the Solomon Islands and the Malayan campaigns, what is of particular note for this chapter is the patriotic role that our central figure, Ratu Sukuna, played in both campaigns.³³ But he was a man of all seasons. When peace returned and Queen Elizabeth II visited at the end of 1953, Ratu Sukuna was again prominent in receiving and welcoming Her Majesty.

Dravuni's 'arrow of time' and its connectedness with events in the capital, this time around, seemed presupposed. However, it was misdirected. An invitation was sent out from Suva to the clan Natusara (comprising Dravuni and Buliya villages) to send a *takia*³⁴ that would be part of the

30 A wooden building existed on the site. The Union Steam Ship Co of NZ Ltd Building next door was built earlier.

31 On 18 June 1948, three years after Japan's surrender, Britain announced its intention to fight against the communist guerrillas known as the Malayan Race Liberation Army. This was after the murder of three rubber planters. This prompted the war in Malaya. On 8 January 1952, more than 800 men of the First Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment boarded the troopship *Asturias* for Malaya, after the march through Suva.

32 Livai Veilawa (senior)'s son, Maciu Waqanisau, turned 18 in 1942. He joined the Territorial Force.

33 Ratu Sukuna had been assigned a leading role in the Fiji Defence Force on his return from World War I. By World War II, he held the post of lieutenant-colonel. In his role, he told the Fijians why they had to go to war: 'We'll never be recognized, unless our blood is shed first.' When the First Battalion returned from the Solomon Islands Campaign on 4 August 1944 on board *Altnitab*, Ratu Sukuna, along with the governor and Brigadier Dittmer, stood on the wharf to welcome the troops home. After the troops had disembarked, the *Altnitab* was returning to bring back the other troops of the Third Battalion.

34 On the basis of the parallelism format adopted for this chapter, two events on my side could have been considered for the narration of the continuation of Dravuni's 'arrow of time'. I have opted for the *takia* race instead of Dravuni's contribution of two soldiers to the Malayan Campaign, namely: Isimeli Vulatolu and Livai Veilawa (Junior). See the latter in Kaliopate Tavola, 'Dravuni men in Malayan Campaign', *Kaidravuni* (blog), 13 June 2010, kaidravuni.com/2010/06/13/dravuni-men-in-malayan-campaign-1952-56/.

armada of small crafts to greet the Queen on her royal yacht *Gothic*. Further, there would also be a *takia* race as part of the commemoration of the visit. The invitation however specified that a *takia* from Buliya Village was to represent the clan. The Roko Tui Kadavu received the message and overruled that Buliya would represent the clan – the *takia* would be crewed by representatives of the clan from both villages.³⁵

And so it was. The clan *takia* sailed to Suva with the other *takia* from Kadavu to join others from other maritime provinces. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was greeted suitably by the armada of *takia* and other small craft. Suva citizens witnessed the *takia* race³⁶ on Suva Harbour. The clan *takia* triumphed. The triumph however had already been foreseen in a dream. Elderly villager Rusiate Qirivabea saw in his sleep the night before the clan *takia* sailing back from Suva with its winner's *masi* banner at the top of the mast, flapping proudly in the wind.

Events Turned Full Circle in 1955

By 1955, when I was to be nine years old, my parents were in search of better educational opportunities for my older brother and I. Suva beckoned, as it had done 67 years earlier in 1888 for the first time and had continued to do so in the intervening years – in 1889–1919 and 1920–1953 as described above. Dravuni's 'arrow of time' was then conceived as a determinant of historicity.

The opportunities, however, that Suva was presenting were different for different periods, as were the beneficiaries, as we have seen above. The beneficiary for the period 1920–1953 was the community. It was the larger community, *yavusa* Natusara that received recognition of their ancient *takia* sailing skills with royal patronage. By 1955, the mode of benefit of Dravuni's 'arrow of time' reverted to personalisation.

35 The Roko Tui Kadavu's rationale in overruling the invitation was that the chief of the clan resides on Dravuni and any participation by the clan would best be sanctioned by Dravuni. After consultations, it was agreed that the crew of the *takia* would include the two chiefs from both villages and their respective *matanivanua*. However, on inspecting the size of the *takia*, it was agreed that there would only be three crew members; both chiefs would pull out and be replaced by Marika Koroivui, acknowledged as the best sailor in the clan.

36 See Kaliopate Tavola, 'Dravuni victorious at the canoe race during HM Queen Elizabeth's coronation visit, 1953', *Kaidravuni* (blog), 17 April 2010, kaidravuni.com/2010/04/17/dravuni-victorious-at-the-canoe-race-during-hm-queen-elizabeths-coronation-visit-1953.

My parents' search for educational opportunities led to the family's migration from the comfort of the village with its rural subsistence affluence to an urban existence with its concomitant challenges. In 1955, the family lived on Toorak Road. I had failed to get a place at Nabua Central Fijian School that year due to being placed low in the priority list, as my birthdate falls late in the second half of the year. I had time therefore for my traditional circumcision and that led to my first sanctioned swim in the sea under the *ivi* tree, and, as metaphorised above, my 'swimming into Suva's history'.

The metaphor can be examined critically in two ways. The first is that by residing in Suva with effect from 1955 and participating in its activities therefrom, my family and I were essentially engaged in creating Suva's own history. We were part of history from the time we arrived. I narrate some of these experiences below.

But apart from the collective history, my family and I were making our own history at the same time. This is where the second critical way of examining the metaphor applies. That is, in 'swimming into Suva's history', I find that Suva's history has had the fortuitous habit of casting its influence on the direction my own history has taken: the individualisation of the history of the collective. I also narrate experiences of this below.

In the intervening year of 1954, after the 1953 royal visit and the arrival of my family in Suva to settle at Toorak Road, and for the succeeding period, Suva witnessed and made its own history. My family and I, by association and/or with some degree of participation, were part of that. There were still, for example, some troops that left and were farewelled for the Malayan Campaign that year in 1954. Suva witnessed their embarkation. The move of the Fiji Museum from its temporary accommodation in the Suva Town Hall from when it opened in 1905 to its present site in Thurston Gardens was another example.

In the same year, Suva celebrated the opening of Broadcasting House and the creation of the Fiji Broadcasting Commission.³⁷

In 1956, Suva celebrated its first Miss Hibiscus Festival. Miss Liebling Hoeflich (Marlow) was the proud wearer of the splendid crown. The next festival in 1957, however, is firmly etched in my mind as a momentous

37 See Lal, *Broken waves*, for background and significance.

one. How could I forget the first ever Soapbox Derby on Cakobau Road? Miss Filimaina Koto, who later married Nelson Delailomaloma, was the Hibiscus Festival Queen. Both worked at Ratu Sukuna Memorial School when I attended in 1961–1964. Nelson was a science teacher and Filimaina was the principal's personal assistant and general office manager.

Also in 1956, Suva witnessed the march through the city of the returning soldiers from the Malayan Campaign – the 1st Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment. The troops arrived on the troopship SS *Devonshire*. I was in Class 4 at Nabua Central Fijian School. School children from various Suva schools were bussed down to the city to line the streets to greet our national heroes.³⁸

The next time school children were bussed to line the streets of Suva was two years later on 9 June 1958. This time around it was a sad occasion to honour and farewell perhaps Fiji's greatest hero.³⁹ Ratu Sukuna's casket was driven through Suva to the wharf to board the *Adi Maopa* on its way to Lakeba for the chiefly burial. The funerary procession proceeded silently past the *ivi* tree at the site of the future park, still under water. But the long wait was almost at its end. The passing of the great chief was to create its own history to add to that of the country's capital city.

But before the memorial park was created, Ratu Sukuna Memorial School opened to its first intake of secondary school students in 1960. I was in the second intake in 1961. RSMS was my first choice and for me, the choice was plain. My family by then lived in Nabua Village along Ratu Mara Road, a stone's throw directly opposite the school.

When it came to choosing a school for Form 7 (then called Upper 6th), Suva's history proved a revelation once again. In 1960, both the Boys Grammar School and the Girls Grammar School opted to join up and it was decided to move the combined school to Veiuto, Nasēsē. Six years later, in 1966, I attended that school.

38 See Manu Korovulavula for a lively commentary of the parade, its configuration, the reception, the ceremonies at Albert Park, and the celebrations by the public: Manunivavalagi Dalituicama Korovulavula, *Malayan Campaign – 1st Battalion Fiji Infantry Regiment, 1952-1956* (Suva: Max Marketing and Publisher Limited, 2014).

39 Ratu Sukuna retired in 1958. He and Lady Liku were on their way to Oxford. They were aboard the cruise ship *Arcadia*. Ratu Sukuna died when the *Arcadia* was off the coast of Ceylon. See Kim Gravelle for an account of the *Arcadia's* captain sending the message to Fiji, the return of Ratu Sukuna's body to Nadi and then to Rairaiwaqa. Gravelle captured the sober mood of the funereal gathering, and the ceremonies performed in his account: Kim Gravelle, *Fiji's times: A history of Fiji*, vols 1–3 (Suva: Fiji Times, 1979).

I was a civil servant for 11 years from 1973 to 1984 in the Ministry of Agriculture. The ministry had different names and permutations over the years. It became the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forests (MAFF) at one time. The site of its head office remained for a long time on what is referred to loosely by many as the 'MAFF land' adjacent to the Suva Bus Stand. Of the 11 years, I worked at MAFF's head office for eight years. It is certainly not lost to me now the significance of that land adjacent to all the reclamations that were taking place to build, expand and improve Suva's Kings Wharf with effect from 1911–1913, 1913–1916, 1961 and 1982. The land adjacent to the port area took some time to grow as a business enclave after the construction of Kings Wharf in 1912.

In my post-diplomatic career, I had three offices in Suva in buildings that are all on reclaimed land from different decades. In 1998–2000, I had an office in Dominion House, now called BSP Life Centre. That building stands on land reclaimed in the 1880s. Between 2000 and 2013, I had offices in Suvavou House and later in one of the bungalows behind Kadavu House. The land on which the two houses stand today was still in the early stage of reclamation in 1955 when my family migrated from the village and lived on Toorak Road.

The completion of land reclamation between the old Suva Grammar School for Boys and the GPH occurred in the 1960s, after the school moved to Veiuto in 1960. This phase of reclamation provided the impetus to reclaim what ended up as the Ratu Sukuna Park. In that specific context, the wait of over eight decades since the first round of reclamation of the Suva waterfront off Thomson Street had finally come to an end.

Conclusions

The title of my chapter is rather long. However, the story I have woven and the approach I have taken have tried to connect these various facets into a coherent whole. In the process, I have invoked the metaphors of 'arrow of time' and parallelism as means of connectedness and directionality while retaining the historicity and periodicity of events. The connectedness arising from these metaphors implies benefit. My family and others have duly benefited as a result.

‘Swimming under the *ivi* tree’ was that which triggered off the narrative flow. But it also provided the underlying essence of the narrative – best depicted by the metaphor ‘swimming into Suva’s history’. I have applied the metaphor as further means of connectedness to additionally bring into play ‘family connections’ in the narrative. And as the essence itself, the metaphor has a way of reflecting and/or impacting family history chronology. In my case, past historical events have had a way of impacting the directions of my own history. This is noteworthy notwithstanding the restricted nature of history under study.

The swim under the *ivi* tree is central in the narrative. Apart from its historical significance, it was indeed a geographical marker, indicating the locale that was to undergo reclamation from the sea for the establishment of Ratu Sukuna Park in memory of one of Fiji’s greatest sons. At the time of the swim, Ratu Sukuna was 67 years old. He passed away three years later.

Suva, of course, has a long history of land reclamation. Its origin dates back to the start of the 1880s, even before Suva became Fiji’s capital in 1882. In my narrative, I have discussed the chronology of land reclamation spanning a period of over eight decades.

The reclamation did not proceed unidirectionally. The pattern was clearly dependent on the planned development of Suva once it became Fiji’s capital. In retrospect, Suva’s waterfront over the years resembled a line with straight-edged indentations in places.

The phase of land reclamation that eventually resulted in the establishment of Ratu Sukuna Park commenced in the early 1960s, a few years after Ratu Sukuna’s demise. While the creation and naming of the park have brought closure to one of the facets of this narrative, it has not brought closure to the reclamation of Suva’s foreshores. Suva’s waterfront will continue to be transformed for a few more years.

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