

## 28. Fijian Ethno-Nationalism<sup>1</sup>

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According to Jerry Muller, there are two major ways of thinking about national identity.<sup>2</sup> One is that all people who live within a country's borders are part of the nation, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious origins. This liberal or civic nationalist interpretation is the view taken by those drafting Fiji's People's Charter. But the liberal view has competed with – and often lost out to – a different view, that of ethno-nationalism. The core of the ethno-nationalist idea is that nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry.

This chapter looks at the politics of identity and the phenomenon of ethno-nationalism, tracing the origins of the latter in indigenous Fijian history. Understanding our local brand of ethno-nationalism is critical to appreciating whether this needs to be incorporated into or excluded from the process of building the nation.

Ethno-nationalism draws much of its emotive power from the notion that the members of a nation are part of an extended family, ultimately united by ties of blood. It is the subjective belief in the reality of a common 'we' that counts. The markers that distinguish the 'in' group vary from case to case and time to time; and the subjective nature of the communal boundaries has led some to discount their practical significance.<sup>3</sup> But, as the inventor of the word 'ethno-nationalism', Walker Connor, an astute student of nationalism, has noted, 'It is not what is, but what people believe is that has behavioral consequences.'<sup>4</sup>

It was Sir Arthur Gordon's 1876 'Fiji for the Fijian' policy that planted the seed of modern Fijian ethno-nationalism. The formation of the Great Council of Chiefs in that year entrenched in the minds of the Fijian chiefs the notion of a Fijian political entity within a geographic realm.<sup>5</sup> The creation of the three *Vanua* Confederacies – Kubuna, Burebasaga and Tovata – was a kind of ethno-nationalistic traditional engineering in support of colonial rule. Prior to this, Fijian political consciousness was traced through folklore to the Nakauvadra/Vuda migration and the founding tribal state of Verata, around 1500–1600AD. It is doubtful that Fijian political consciousness can be traced to the Lapita people's eastward migration some 1000BC, or 3000 years ago. (The Lapita people, identified by their distinctive pottery style, were the first to move across the Pacific, probably from the Bismarck Archipelago in what is now Papua New Guinea.)<sup>6</sup> What role the Lapita people played in Fiji is uncertain, but it is now thought that they rapidly evolved into modern Polynesians, including the

New Zealand Maori. One possibility is that the present Melanesian stock of people in Fiji results from a migration wave later than that of the Lapita peoples.

Ethno-nationalist beliefs were evident before indigenous Fijians converted to Christianity, as recorded amongst the so-called 'Kai Colo' in dealing with the Kai Wai, the 'them' of the 'out' group. Originally, adherence to a common Fijian (or interior Fijian) identity was in opposition to the encroachment of Christianity. An eye-witness account of Cakobau's Christianization war campaign in Ba was reported in *The Fiji Times* of 23 July 1870:

The mountaineers from Navosa came down to Nalotu, an inland district, hitherto subject to Ba and the advanced fortress, or Bai-ni-mua of the Ba people. They put up a war fence, and then Wawabalavu, the Navosa chief, called out and said, 'You Nalotu people, I am Wawabalavu. It was I who ate Mr Baker, and the Bau men. Do you trust the Lasakau men (fishermen and sea warriors of Bau). Don't, their trade is fishing.'<sup>7</sup>

The Nalotu people believed their fellow hillmen's rhetoric, the mountaineers were let into the fortress, and a frightful slaughter of native Fijians who had accepted Christianity ensued.<sup>8</sup> Hence, the blood bond now known as the Tako-Lavo relationship of Viti Levu hill tribes was used by Nawawabalavu to facilitate this treachery. Ironically, since independence, Wesleyan Christianity has morphed into Fijian ethno-nationalism, and became a key ideological influence behind the 1987 and 2000 coups.

The common feature of both pre- and post-Christian ethno-nationalism is the distrustful, hostile portrayal of the 'out' group. On 22 January 1875 at Navuso, Naitasiri, administrators, along with Ratu Cakobau and his two sons who had returned from Sydney, Australia, briefed some 800 hill chiefs and their tribal retinues on the implications of Fiji's new status as a colony. Ratu Cakobau and his two sons had carried back with them a strain of measles.<sup>9</sup> The resulting measles epidemic that hit Fiji from January to around June 1875 wiped out 30 per cent or 50,000 of the indigenous population. That tragedy came on the heels of forced conversion to Christianity. Colonial cession, which appeared to many as a foreign conspiracy, was still fresh in the minds of some of the chiefs amongst the Viti Levu hill tribes and the events became linked. The resulting distrust of 'them foreigners', as engrained in the Kai Colo psyche, has since been applied by ethno-nationalists to all migrants to our shores.

After this, ethno-nationalism lay dormant for some hundred years, except for Navosavakadua's Tuka sect and the early colonial indigenous commercial enterprise, Viti Kabani. Under colonial and monarchic rule, Fijians were content with being British subjects, even if this was largely only symbolic.<sup>10</sup> After independence, ethno-nationalism first re-emerged with Sakeasi Butadroka's cry of 'Fiji for the Fijians' – much to the annoyance of the chiefly led Alliance party

with its all-inclusive racial policies. This artificial political façade was hard-wired to fail, given the flawed compromise of the 1970 constitution.

As Norton argues:

... conflict between indigenous Fijians and immigrant Indians, though strongly based in economic and socio-cultural differences, has not been intensified by acquiring a function in the reconstruction of identities previously suppressed. Manipulation of ideals and symbols by Fijian leaders to secure popular support has tended to reaffirm established frames of routine social and political life within Fijian groups, rather than being an innovative assertion of distinctiveness in opposition to 'the other'.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the aftermath of the coups of 1987 and 2000, the triumph of ethno-national parties (as some would describe the SVT and, later, SDL) entailed a victory of traditional rural groups over more urbanized ones – those which possess the skills desirable in an advanced industrial economy.

In the wake of both those coups, and after the 2006 'guardian' coup, migration of victims economically penalized Fiji and economically rewarded those countries which opened their doors to the migrants. 'Forced' migration was driven by the majority group's resentment of the minority group's success, and the mistaken assumption that achievement is a zero-sum game. As seen elsewhere in the world, countries that get rid of their minority groups – whether Armenians, Germans, Greeks, Jews, or others – deprive themselves of some of their most talented citizens.<sup>12</sup>

As perceived by Fiji's military prior to the 2006 coup, ethno-nationalist ideology – as codified in the Qoliqoli and Promotion of Reconciliation, Unity and Tolerance bills – entailed insistence on a congruence between the state and the ethnically defined nation. The results were explosive. As Lord Acton recognized in 1862, 'By making the state and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationalism] reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary'.<sup>13</sup> Analysts of ethno-nationalism typically focus on its destructive effects; understandably so given the huge human suffering it has often entailed: The first and second world wars were direct results of the destructive aspects of this phenomenon.

However, if ethno-nationalism has frequently led to tension and conflict, it has also proved to be a source of cohesion and stability. Muller contends that, when French textbooks began with 'Our ancestors the Gauls' or when Churchill spoke to wartime audiences of 'this island race', they appealed to ethno-nationalist sensibilities as a source of mutual trust and sacrifice. In similar fashion, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, Fiji's first statesman, in recruiting Fijians for war duty, stated that,

as a nation, Fiji would not be recognized unless its sons sacrificed blood on the battlefields for freedom.<sup>14</sup>

As in European history, ethno-nationalism was not a chance detour. It corresponds to some enduring propensities of the human spirit that are heightened by the process of modern state creation. It is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity, and, in one form or another, it will remain for many generations to come. One can only profit from facing it directly. Liberal democracy and ethnic homogeneity are not only compatible; they can be complementary. We as a nation will have to learn to live with it along with the intended civic and more liberal nationalism espoused by the draft People's Charter.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> First published in the *Fiji Daily Post*, 3 September 2008, and reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Muller, J.Z. 2008. 'Us and Them: The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar/Apr 2008, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Muller, 2008, 'Us and Them'.

<sup>4</sup> Connor Walker, C. 1994. *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, p. 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Handbook of Fiji*, 1968. Government Printing Office, p. 76. Original from the University of California, digitized 7 November 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Nunn, P.D. 2007. *Climate, Environment, and Society in the Pacific During the Last Millennium*, Elsevier, Amsterdam and London p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Gravelle, K. 1988. *Fiji's Times: A History of Fiji*, Published by The Fiji Times, p. 102.

<sup>8</sup> 'Mountaineers from Navosa kill 370 in four towns in Ba on the North West Coast of Viti Levu', *The Fiji Times*, 23 July 1870.

<sup>9</sup> Hays, J.N. 2005. *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History*, ABC-CLIO Publications, Santa Barbara, CA, pp. 297–298.

<sup>10</sup> Kaplan, M. 1995. *Neither Cargo Nor Cult: Ritual Politics and the Colonial Imagination in Fiji*, Duke University Press, Durham p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Norton, R. 1993. 'Ethno-nationalism and the Constitutive Power of Cultural Politics', *African and Asian Studies*, Volume 28, Numbers 3–4, pp. 180–197.

<sup>12</sup> Muller, 'Us and Them', p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Muller, 'Us and Them'.

<sup>14</sup> Ravuvu, A. 1974. *Fijians at War*, IPS Publications, Suva, p. 4.