



Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies

State Society and Governance *in* Melanesia

TRADITIONAL CULTURE AND MODERN POLITICS

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I have recently been revising my book, *From the Mangrove Swamps*, first published in 1988 by the Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific. I have retitled it *Mai Na Veidogo*, the Fijian translation of the original. *Mai Na Veidogo* was initially intended as an autobiography, but I found that I was telling the inside story of the political and social evolution of Fiji as one of those at the heart of the process. This fascinating story is woven through the account of my own emergence from a humble family in a small village in the Rewa Delta to become administrator of a wide range of government projects and head of various government ministries, before entering politics and being elected to Cabinet. I held several important portfolios and was also Speaker. The book contains an inside view of the military *coup* of 14 May 1987 and insights into the future of Fiji.

The book consists of two parts and fifteen chapters. Part One and the first eleven chapters are a revised version of the original. Part Two and the last four chapters contain the additional chapters. There are new appendices which include some of my speeches in parliament which reflect on my policies as a Minister.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I give an account of life in my small rural village: freedom, happiness,

and not too much worry about what happened next. Everyone in the village was related to each other. I learnt traditions, customs and various village activities—how to fish, how to trap mud crabs—by actually engaging in them. I was sent by my parents to a multi-racial boys school run by the Methodist Church in Suva. The multiracial character of the school broadened my outlook and played a prominent role in my future thinking and beliefs.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 give an account of how my education, along with that of others, was interrupted by World War II, and how I joined the Fiji Infantry Regiment in early 1943 and served with the armed forces for more than three years. At the end of the war most of us did not know what to do next and I was assigned to teach by the Rehabilitation Officer.

I describe my period of teaching and my first appointment to the Fiji civil service at the princely annual salary of one hundred pounds. This was the beginning of an upward climb, from rural school teacher to high level bureaucrat. My civil service career lasted 27 years (January 1948 to July 1974), excluding three years of military service.

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I describe in Chapters 6 and 7 how I began to be interested in politics. I decided to resign when I was at the uppermost rung of the civil service ladder at the age of 47. I did not know what I was going to do next or where to go to from there. Then, with my wife and sister I started running a small bakery. From a permanent head of a government ministry to baking and selling pies! I decided to get into politics seriously and three years later I stood for election and in 1977, on election, was immediately appointed to Cabinet and served thereafter in a number of ministries.

I was appointed Speaker of the House of Representatives of Fiji after the general election of 1982. I describe in Chapters 8 and 9 the problems I faced as the Speaker. At the 1987 election my party (Alliance) lost. I discuss my own strategy during the 1987 campaign and try to outline some of the achievements of the Alliance during its years in power.

The two chapters 10 and 11 outline the events leading to the two military *coups*. I also mention briefly the formation of the Interim Government and some of the undercurrent of feelings of the Fijians which led to the *coups*. Then I go on to describe the efforts made by the Governor-General to return Fiji to parliamentary democracy and the accord reached at Deuba after tense and protracted negotiations between the major political parties and the Governor-General. I explain how the second *coup* was staged, how the political parties renegotiated with the *coup* leader and how the military government was formed and eventually failed as well as the declaration of Fiji as a Republican State and the handing over of the power to the President. I end this part of the book by giving my own views on what should be done by the various racial groups in Fiji to make the country a better place to live in for all of its people.

Chapter 12 deals with Fiji's economic problems and how they were dealt with by the Interim Government. The Interim Government had two main objectives: to repair the ailing economy and to draft a new constitution for Fiji.

In Chapter 13, I sketch the background of the 1990 Constitution and briefly discuss how it

attempted to accommodate the hopes and aspirations of the Fijian and Rotuman peoples. One argument in its favour was that the drafters of the document included a provision which mandated a review of the Constitution within seven years of its promulgation.

Chapter 14 gives details of how the 1990 Constitution was reviewed. I also talk about the steps that were then taken to make the Commission's Report a public document and the general reaction of the people of Fiji when the Report was released to the public.

I end the book in Chapter 15 by reflecting on Fiji in transition; the enormous changes that have taken place in the last 70 years; the development in infrastructure, health, education and generally the changing lifestyle of the people of Fiji.

I have written about these changes in Fiji for the benefit of future generations so that they will not take for granted that life was always as good or as easy. We worked hard to bring about those improvements to everyday life. I want my own grandchildren to understand that I grew up in a small fishing village and walked barefoot a long way on unsealed roads to go to school everyday. Education was the only way for us as children in those days to find a way out of that poor village.

CIVIL SERVICE

The Fijian colonial civil service was divided into a senior and a junior category. As a local, one had to be extremely efficient and dedicated to be promoted to the senior category. Some local civil servants never got to the senior positions during their life time. It took me more than 12 years to reach the bottom rung of one of the senior positions, and to enjoy some of the privileges enjoyed by the senior civil servants who were mostly British expatriates: I was able, for example, to take long vacations of six months at the end of every four years, and was entitled to a full return sea passage to England with my family! In fact when a senior civil servant went on holiday he would be away for the better part of nine months before he got back to the office. The pace was slow as nearly all decisions, and



certainly major decisions, had to be made in London. We did not have the authority to make major decisions.

There was some development during the colonial period, but there could have been a lot more, especially in terms of infrastructure. No major development was undertaken as the funds had to come from London—a good excuse for the expatriate officers. We did not have enough funds in Fiji itself to generate economic development, and what is more, we probably could not have borrowed on our own to carry out developmental projects.

Ideas and concepts also changed as the colonial administrators moved from one colonial territory to another. I often heard in my workplace, 'In Kenya, we do it like this!', 'In Uganda, we do it like this!'. I suppose when our senior people went to those colonies, they probably said, 'In Fiji, we do it like this!'. The colonial administrators also had to make sure that positions were reserved for other expatriate officers when their time came to return or to transfer to another colony.

There was little training provided for local officers. Even if training was given to a few, the confidential annual reports which were written by expatriate officers invariably contained a paragraph which said that the local officers required a few more years to gain experience. Just enough time for the expatriate to leave! In spite of all this, the local officers were serving the colonial administration with loyalty and respect even when some expatriate officers were younger than themselves.

Civil servants, particularly Fijians, were traditionally passive. They took what was given and did not ask, and this affected their careers. They respected the white 'chiefs' representing Her Majesty's government. Even local Chiefs had to take second place to the British administrators.

This was the situation local civil servants found themselves in when independence came in 1970. Most of us civil servants thought that we were not quite ready for independence. We did not have the right training to take over the important jobs. I think it was through the

foresight of our Chief Minister then, who later became Prime Minister and is now the President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, that some of us were put through a pressure cooker course at the University of the South Pacific in 1970 to prepare us to take on the much more important and difficult tasks of becoming permanent heads of Ministries.

INDEPENDENCE

Whether Fiji asked for independence or independence was pushed onto Fiji is a matter that might be discussed by historians for quite some time. From a grassroots Fijian perspective, I am going to argue that independence was pushed onto us.

Fijians were reluctant to accept independence for a number of reasons. Generally, Fijians were happy with the way Fiji had been governed. The high Chiefs of Fiji ceded their country to Queen Victoria and they looked to the British, especially the Crown, to look after their interests as stipulated in the Deed of Cession. The Fijians felt that they had a special relationship with the the Royal family. They loved, and had the greatest respect for, the Royal family. They did not like to disrupt that special relationship. They respected as well as accepted the British administrators who administered Fiji. This was the Fijian position for almost a century.

In addition, Fijians had their own parallel system of governing themselves through the meetings of village, *tikina* and provincial councils. They had the Council of Chiefs which spoke on their behalf and nominated their political representatives to the Legislative Council. Their custom and culture had not changed much and their religion was well established. They were more or less satisfied with the *status quo*.

In the traditional system, leaders do not have to come through the rank and file, they are born leaders. They may not have apprenticeships at all. The system works in the following way. First, you know there is one person you can go and talk to, and that is the Chief who has influence. If you can convince him, half the battle is won: he

will go and do the convincing on your behalf. It is not a system that should be discarded or disregarded. I see a lot of merit in it because the chiefs have been doing so for hundreds of years and they know how to deal with their own people. The British also probably saw this as a great help, although it is seen by modern scholars as undemocratic.

There was a general feeling of reluctance at the time independence was talked about, but the winds of change were blowing across Asia and Africa, and reached the Pacific a little later. It was mostly the politicians and London that decided in favour of independence. There was no general consultation with ordinary people. We went in without getting ourselves prepared for it. People on the whole were unprepared, even stunned (as one District Officer reported), when Fiji became independent.

To be independent created anxiety and fear. People did not understand what independence was all about. Would it bring good or evil? Would it be beneficial to them and in what way? Would it change their way of life, their culture and religion? These were some of the issues that were discussed by ordinary Fijians around a *tanoa of yaqona* in the evening when they first heard that independence was being proposed. Civil servants also feared that they were not prepared enough to take over the jobs of the British colonial officers. They feared that British colonial aid funds would cease, and no more roads, hospitals, schools, airstrips or jetties would be built. Fijians felt that they could be worse off.

However, it was clear that independence could not be rejected for ever. There were pushes for independence within Fiji, particularly from the Indian community leaders and also from forces outside Fiji. Most or nearly all colonies were becoming independent. In the Pacific, Western Samoa (a trust territory) took the lead in 1962. Fiji had to be independent at some future date. The Fijians left this question to the Council of Chiefs and their political leaders to deal with.

As the Fijians assessed their position they found that the Indians were far better off economically and socially than themselves. This

led the Fijians to fear that they would be dominated by the Indians. There were more Indians in commerce, in well-paid jobs, and in the professions. Fijians could not get into commerce because this was largely in the hands of the Indian community. They feared that Fiji would be completely run by the Indian community and Fiji would become a little India of the Pacific. There was at one time a Director of Localisation in the government but there was none in the private sector where large companies like Burns Philp, the Colonial Sugar Refining Company and one or two others were in the hands of the Australians. So while government was doing something to prepare the civil servants for eventual independence, very little was done in the other sectors.

Thus, various anxieties made the Fijians, particularly their leaders, not ready to accept independence when it was first mooted. In fact, when the Fijian leaders changed their stance they preferred to have a free association with Britain on the lines of the Isle of Man. Later, when independence became a certainty, Fijian leaders only accepted it on their own terms. This resulted in a letter addressed to Her Majesty's government by all the Fijian members of the Legislative Council setting out their terms for Fiji's independence. The letter, known the *Wakaya Letter*, contained the following terms: any new constitutional arrangement should make provision for the special relationship between Fiji and the United Kingdom as embodied in the Deed of Cession; a precise restatement of the guarantees of Fijian land ownership; the Native Land Trust legislation should not be changed or added to without the prior consent of the Council of Chiefs and the Sovereign; the preamble should state that Fiji should be a Christian state as desired by the High Chiefs in the Deed of Cession; the Fijian Affairs Ordinance and all legislation affecting Fijian rights and interests should be referred to the Fijian Affairs Board and the Council of Chiefs; the Governor to give a directive to the Public Service Commission to work towards a balance in Civil Service; and the initiative for any constitutional



change should come from the Fijian people.

Another area where the Fijians were not prepared was politics. While the Indians had some political framework through the National Cane Growers Association, the Fijians were not politically organised. When it was clear that independence could not be avoided or delayed any further, the Fijians then began to organise themselves politically. The Fijian Association was then formed. The officials of the Association were the Chiefs and some senior Fijian civil servants. The Association was organised through the provinces, *tikina* and villages. Although not every Fijian joined the Fijian Association it represented the majority view and was recognised as such.

Between 1937 and 1963, a period of just over a quarter century, there was a political lull. In 1963 however matters began to move and elections were held in that year. In 1964 a system of membership government was introduced in Fiji where 3 unofficial members of the Legislative Council were given responsibilities for certain areas of government. Ratu Kamisese Mara became the Member for Natural Resources, A.D. Patel, Member for Social Services and J.N. Falvey, Member for Communications and Works. A constitutional conference was held in 1965 followed by a general election in 1966. After that election a system of limited ministerial government was introduced and Ratu Kamisese Mara became the Chief Minister. Four years later, following months of negotiations between the two political parties, The Alliance and the National Federation Party, another constitutional conference was held in London and Fiji was given full independence on 10 October 1970.

When Fiji eventually became independent, enormous changes took place. But the fears that were there in the minds of the Fijians before independence did not go away and eventually resulted in the events of 1987.

To go back to my original question, whether Fiji asked for or was pushed into independence, my answer would be that both forces were at work. The Indian community were pushing for independence through their political leaders and Britain (because of the demands placed upon it

by the UN committee for decolonisation) had urged the Fijians to accept independence. In short, from a Fijian perspective, independence was pushed onto us.

A MINISTER IN INDEPENDENT FIJI

During my service as a Minister I found things to be totally different from the colonial days. We no longer relied on London to make important decisions. The Cabinet, of which I was a member, had to work as a team. There were twelve cabinet ministers and about five ministers of state or assistant ministers. Ministers with big portfolios had assistant ministers. I did not have an assistant, so I had to battle on on my own. The ball was now in our court. We had to make decisions, and decisions were made within the four walls of my office, or at least formulated there. There was no more going to London. We had to guide the destiny of our country so we had to make those decisions. Hard or easy, they were made in Fiji.

The decisions made in Cabinet were made collectively and every member had to support them publicly at least. Individual members of the Cabinet were free to make statements or take decisions about their own portfolios as long as they did not embarrass the government or that of one of their colleagues.

On a number of occasions meetings of Cabinet were held outside Suva. This was good as Ministers were able to see at first hand the developments that were taking shape in the areas visited. Moreover, it gave Ministers the sense of serving the whole country rather than their own narrow constituencies. Sometimes I would go on my own to visit some of the areas which concerned my portfolio to see what was happening. I was given the full Fijian ceremony of welcome because of what I represented. This could be embarrassing because I was a commoner and Chiefs of the area were present. Those ceremonies were made as a mark of respect to the government I represented or sometimes in the expectation that whatever request might be

made would be accepted by government.

Some of those visits could be tricky too because, as I said, you visit as a minister but you might say something which might commit another minister and the people there did not regard you as the minister for Transport, they regard you as the government. You had to be careful in what you said so as not to unwittingly commit the government.

Meetings of the Cabinet were formal and if a member wanted a major policy made he would take it to Cabinet in a paper to have it approved. There were times also when Cabinet met informally and those meetings were called 'listening post'. They were held sometimes in a relaxed atmosphere so that ministers could raise matters not pertaining to their own ministry. During the 'listening post', any member of the Cabinet could raise any matter even if it was not within his portfolio; usually matters which Ministers picked up from their visits to other areas or from around the *yaqona* bowl. 'Listening post' meetings were a means of testing the pulse of the nation.

INTERIM GOVERNMENT

Serving in the Interim Government was a bit different and difficult. For one thing I was not elected—we were just brought in to do a job. Second, the Interim Government had two special agenda items to work to: to repair the ailing economy and to draft a new constitution for Fiji. These were the two main objectives of the Interim Government. Both of those objects were achieved in the end.

There was a mixed bag of people in the Cabinet. Some of us had some experience of being a minister, some of us had been in the Alliance Government, while others were brought in for the first time. They were not in government before nor in an elected government but we all worked as a team. The Ministers' thinking and performances had to be geared towards the main objectives. The work was not easy as people were still recovering from the trauma of two military coups. I had some

visits to the countryside but sometimes I was received or regarded with suspicion.

There were two urgent matters to attend to and these could not await the return of an elected government: the unsound financial position the Housing Authority found itself in (there were debts amounting to millions of dollars), and the city and town council elections. In general terms, Ministers were free to do what was required to be done in their respective portfolios but within the rules of collective responsibility.

By the end of our time in the interim government, I think we had achieved our objectives. The economy was repaired, and investor confidence in particular was returning to normal. Foreign reserves were high. The new draft constitution was prepared. There was an air of public confidence. I was happy and proud to be part of the process of bringing Fiji back to the path of democracy.

THE FUTURE

It is sometimes said that tradition and indigenous culture sit awkwardly with the Westminster system and that a modified Westminster model might be better suited for Fiji. The Westminster system recognises merit. It rewarded those who were efficient and capable. It required a long period of apprenticeship. Leaders came through the rank and file. It was, to the western mind, the only system to be used because it is democratic.

On the other hand, Fijian tradition and culture recognised hereditary leaders irrespective of ability. Leaders were born leaders. Decisions of the leaders were carried out or became law. Discipline was strict and justice was swift.

The political culture in Fiji has been established for nearly thirty years or more with its formal checks and balances, and a modified Westminster model is probably the best for Fiji. The people of Fiji want to know their next government on completion of an election and not have to wait for months, like the recent situation in New Zealand. Fiji is used to a government formed by the winning party after an election. In this way decisions can be made



speedily. A large group of people or parties in the government would delay government activities even at crucial times and I do not think that a government of National Unity would work in Fiji, as some submissions to the Constitutional Review Commission argued.

In view of what might appear to be great differences I believe the two systems can be complementary to each other. I believe that the colonial British Administrators saw that and made use of it and thus successfully ran Fiji for nearly 100 years before we became independent.

Sometimes, however, customs and traditional culture can confront you with embarrassing situations in discharging your official duties. It is very difficult I can assure you when sometimes you tell your own people or relatives that you cannot agree to what they want. It is very difficult if they come to you in the traditional way. But pressure is always there in any leadership role and is compounded a great deal in a multi-ethnic society.

In Parliament, when I was Speaker, I was always criticised by one side of the House if I ruled in favour of the other. Sometimes the issue was not ethnicity but gender or sports or religion. My point is that there will always be pressures on any leader.

I will give you an example: the House was debating a motion to increase salaries and I had ruled, because the debate was so intense, that some matters raised should not be brought up again. That was in the morning. The Prime Minister came in the afternoon. He had not been present in the morning. He wanted to go back to the earlier debate and I stopped him, but I had to summon a lot of courage to do that. He was my party leader, and he was my Chief.

There is a lot to be said for multi-racial schools and the role they can play in the development of multi-racialism in Fiji and maybe that is where we should begin rather than syphoning off future leaders of Fiji to separate institutions. Students should be exposed to other races so that they come out of the school system with open minds. I strongly believe this not only because I came through that way, but I believe

the future of Fiji lies with everybody working together and cooperating with each other.

Institutions such as churches, sporting bodies and other social or charitable organisations can play useful roles in this respect. Our political culture over the past 50 years has been based on racial divisions. We always had members of the legislative council and parliament based on races, even under the 1970 constitution. An attempt was made in 1972 under the Local Government Act to have open elections, but the people's thinking was racially based and it did not help much. People's thinking must be changed first. The whole idea of living in a multi-racial society must be tackled. I believe that if we continue to move along that way we will get there, perhaps in 50 years' time.