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**INDIGENEITY AND INDENTURE:
LAND AND IDENTITY IN FIJI**

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In a workshop on Subaltern and Indigenous Histories, Dipesh Chakrabarty asked: 'Can postcolonial histories and indigenous histories engage in a dialogue?'¹ This question is particularly relevant for cultural studies in the Pacific because it encapsulates the nature of the intellectual and political problems that scholars of that area face. Now more than ever, in Fiji, the task of provincializing Europe means interrogating the models imported from it – democracy, a belief in progress and modernity, ideas of state and nation, developmentalist transformation.

This question has a particularly empowering effect because it puts the process of making history in the picture. Chakrabarty, in another context, has pointed out that non-western histories are themselves subaltern because they exist in the shadow of Europe. This is not solely because of colonization's powerful intrusion into other continents but because Europe's self-perceived movement toward state-building capitalist development and modernity marked and still mark a vision of historical progress against which African, Asian, Pacific or Latin American history appears as failure of the nation to come into its own.²

Many scholars have said that it is hard to return to the archive or the field after engaging in a postmodern critique of the transparency of the enterprise³. It is no longer possible to for the archive or the field to have their previous centrality in isolation from textual analysis or literary sources. The methodological self-consciousness about the possibility of recovering and rendering histories, practices, beliefs and actions through this diversity of narratives and enactments leaves many scholars floundering between grand theory and human agency, timeless truths and thick descriptions, somewhere at the intersection of history, political economy and culture.⁴

Can the dialogue between indigenous and postcolonial histories become empowered through the trace of entanglements and conversations, 'riven by epistemological doubts'⁵ and embedded in 'the shared predicament of the colonized or the once-colonized in that they have to speak in the master's voice in order to be heard?'⁶ These entanglements reveal colonialism not as a teleological force but a fundamentally contested historical process – stubbornly acted upon by all sorts of groups in societies, elite or subaltern. Scholars of various disciplines can no longer stroll off to places of research carrying paradigms in their backpacks, but have rather to consider the ways in which colonial categories of knowledge simplified and made one-dimensional the multi-sided experiences of people in colonies. They have to deal with the fertile but crucial tensions between efforts to recover the history and the agency of colonised peoples and to analyse their discursive production.

The specific case of Fiji dramatises some fascinating conflicts of paradigms in attempts at conceptualising land, identity and nation. As Canadian political philosopher Joseph Carens remarked in a 1992 article, 'Democracy and Respect for Difference: the Case of Fiji', published in the *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, 'What makes the case of Fiji particularly rich and rewarding for purposes of reflection is its moral complexities and ambiguities. There are two groups in conflict here and both arouse our moral sympathies'. In this article, Carens defends policies designed to maintain indigenous land ownership or to preserve chiefly authority in Fijian society and politics as essential to help preserve traditional Fijian culture, even though those arrangements impose some costs on the Indo-Fijian population. Carens' complex and subtle

discussion claims that these illiberal practices have been good for native Fijians. 'It seems plausible to suppose that policies more in keeping with liberal individualism - for example an insistence on individual, alienable title to land as opposed to the collective, inalienable form of ownership adopted in Fiji -- might have had disastrous consequences for native Fijians as such policies did elsewhere' (576). Although the practices involve restrictions of individual rights, native Fijians have, on the whole, genuinely benefited from them.

Carens also has a connected negative argument. He claims that these arrangements to preserve traditional Fijian culture do not involve serious violations of moral requirements and are not 'dependent on the subordination of any other group' (594). Thus, for example, although native Fijians have secured their continued ownership of the vast majority of land, 'Fijian dominance in this area is balanced by the dominance Indians have achieved in other areas of economic life' (595). Carens is therefore suggesting that policies designed to preserve cultural differences may be legitimate as long as they do not violate what he calls 'minimal moral standards' (628). He is therefore critical of the 1987 military coups because their " goal was... the firm establishment of native Fijian political hegemony" (574). By contrast, Fiji's political system before the coup, including the arrangements designed to protect traditional Fijian culture, was not 'dependent on the subordination of any other group' and so did not, Carens argues, deny Indians equal citizenship.

The history of this 'moral ambiguity', the counterposing of two different sets of 'rights', is crucial to this debate. Two different manifestations of colonialism were at work in Fiji in the nineteenth century. The paternalistic interventions of the British governor-general Arthur Gordon aimed to protect the rights and way of life of indigenous Fijians after cession. At the same time the economic imperatives of colonialism necessitated the import of indentured Indians to Fiji to extract profit from the sugar plantations.

Gordon, the first governor of Fiji, had learnt from his experiences in Mauritius and his knowledge of the situation of indigenous people in New Zealand and Australia. He decided that the 'continued existence of the Fijian race was dependent on the preservation of their traditions against the corrupting influences of the planter community.'⁷ One of the major consequences of his policies is the fact that at the current time, Fiji has 82.38% of its land under native title, 9.45% State land and 8.17% freehold.⁸ Most Indians and Europeans farm or conduct business on leasehold of native title land. Under the 1966 Agricultural Landlords and Tenants Ordinance, many Indo-Fijian farmers secured 30-year leases, at relatively low rents for sugar cane cultivation. These leases started expiring in 1997, and a Native Land Trust Board (NLTB) survey suggested that many landowners either wanted to reclaim their lands or alter leasing terms and rentals.

In *Fiji in Transition*, J N Kamikamica writes:

The land question is one of the most divisive and potent political issues in Fiji. It underlies and permeates the economic, social and political fabric of Fiji society ... The Fijian indigenous community regard their land as a symbol of identification of their place and traditional role in society. To them, the land is basically a heritage to be protected and safeguarded. It maintains their links with the past and offers security to them, now and in the future.⁹

However, as Josetaki Waqanisau pointed out after the 2000 coup, the 82.5% of native land controlled by indigenous Fijians include areas most suitable for tourism, Fiji's largest foreign exchange earner. There are more than eighty hotel or tourism leases administered by the Native Land Trust Board which is responsible for leasing Fijian owned land on behalf of the owners. These include Sheraton, Warwick, Naviti, Treasure Island, Castaway and Mana Island Resorts among others. Native landowners currently receive substantial annual incomes from tourism leases.¹⁰

Still, the major grievance felt by indigenous Fijians against the Mahendra Chaudhry government elected in 1999 was around the issue of land. An Agricultural Landlords and Tenants Act (ALTA) task force looking into the future of the substantial numbers of land leases which were up for renewal recommended against continuing with ALTA, claiming that Fijian landowners had been denied active participation in the sugar industry and use of their land. It accused the Native Land Trust Board and the government of failing to protect landowner interests and promote opportunities for Fijians. It recommended that no compensation be paid to tenants whose leases are not renewed for 'unauthorised improvements' to land (despite farmers' claims that landowners were aware of and did not object to improvements). Through consultation with the Council of Chiefs, the Chaudhry government developed proposals for a Land Use Commission and reform of the powerful, Native Lands Trust Board. It also proposed a one-off payment of F\$28,000 for farmers whose leases were not to be renewed. This engendered suspicions that Chaudhry had used land reform to divide Chiefs from commoners and throw money at his Indian constituency.

After the coup, some Fijians tried to highlight pro-indigenous policies then current such as indigenous Fijians scholarships available through the Fijians Affairs Board, programs encouraging Fijians in business such as incentives for share holdings with foreign and Fijians owned businesses, and easy access to credit from the Fiji Development Bank. Waqanisau quotes Laisenia Qarase, the current interim prime minister, saying in 1993:

Indigenous Fijians have easier access to loan funds for business establishment, purchase or development. Fiji Development Bank administers several such schemes including a number under the general heading of commercial loans to Fijians. (Waqanisau, 2)

Academics from the University of the South Pacific also tried to point out that there was evidence to show that poverty in the Indo-Fijian community was comparable to that in the indigenous Fijian community. Wealthy Indo-Fijians were a relatively small percentage of the Indian population. If the Fiji Poverty Report of 1996 was at all credible, the very poorest in Fiji included as many Indo-Fijians as indigenous Fijians.

What these well-meaning interventions did not seem to take into account was that, even with this pattern of land ownership and policies of affirmative action, there has continued to remain a clear perception amongst indigenous Fijians that indigenous land rights, well-being and cultures are under threat and that Fijians are losing control of their society. The history and experience of land codification, ownership and use in Fiji imbues these perceptions and, to a large extent, informs the current political climate.

Peter France¹¹ has pointed out that the efforts to establish and codify customary land tenure in Fiji began very early in the colonial period. Rights of the indigenous inhabitants were initially guaranteed against the claims of European settlers and later Indian

immigrants. Land assumed a different place in the ethnic relations and the political field of colonial and independent Fiji. Henry Rutz, in his article 'Capitalizing on Custom' terms this the 'moral irony' in Fijian history:

The founding of an orthodoxy pertaining to Fijian traditions in general, and to land rights in particular, had as its underlying motivation the preservation of a Fijian way of life. In the event, a way of life was constructed on the foundations of village life and buttressed by bureaucratic administrative regulations and procedures. Europeans contributed to an ideology of traditionalism and to a 'Fijian world view' in which the form of the moral economy was opposed against an emergent capitalist society... [Later] the founding of a capitalist land corporation inside the structure of invented tradition is perhaps the greatest irony of Fijian history. The case is only slightly overstated by saying that, whereas Fijian tradition was in large part invented by Europeans as a bulwark against the most harmful aspects of their capitalist system, Fijian modernism is being constructed by Fijian capitalists in a modern chiefly state.¹²

Much of the best arable land of Fiji had been alienated prior to cession in 1874 and was in the hands of Australian settlers and planters who, by living separately from the villages, posed the threat of land alienation and exclusive private property. Peter France documents how chiefly arrogation of the power to alienate land increased with the temptations of payment in trade goods, cash or services by whites and extended far beyond its precolonial boundaries.¹³ The complexities of the situation became obvious when Gordon convened a number of important Fijian Chiefs under the invented title of the Great Council of Chiefs to discuss the return of alienated land. They were unable to agree. Indeed they proclaimed great diversity of property concepts and much ambiguity in Fijian relations toward the land. Only when faced with the prospect of having the land alienated, did the chiefs agree to the creation by administrative fiat communal land-owning units (*mataqali* translated as lineage or clan). These *mataqalis* had the rights of usufruct for land in perpetuity. The new orthodoxy of inalienability meant that Fijian land practices were now inflexibly codified in ways that proscribed such Fijian customs as diverse forms of land-gift and tribute. Social units such as lineage, clan and tribe as well as custom were constructed as immemorial and unchanging, 'tradition was removed from and placed above the historical events that led to its creation'.¹⁴ However, since agricultural production and trade had to be facilitated, the Native Land Trust Board was created in the 1940s to lease this inalienable land to Indian sugar-cane farmers and was seen by indigenous Fijians as protective of their interests. In fact, as Rutz argues, it caused further contradictions in the structure of land control by closing off the capaciousness and flexibility of previous land practices. It turned chiefs into effective landowners, an inversion of Fijian culture which places ownership in the hands of commoners. In fact, the protracted negotiations between the NLTB and the *mataqali* served to mask the potential conflict inherent in this system.

These complexities and conflicts are intensified because of the lived experiences of Fijians in both the past and the present. Margaret Jolly, amongst others, believes that for indigenous Fijians the past exists in the present; the past and the present are seen as continuous and enmeshed, rather than discrete entities. Therefore, the way of money (associated sometimes with Europeans but mainly with Indians),¹⁵ which is seen as existing solely in and for the present, is contrasted with the way of the land (the Fijian way) which existed immutably in the constructed past of indigenous Fijians as well as in the lived present. Ironically, both communities now appear to desire a 'true' present –

indigenous Fijians by 'forgetting' the history of land codification and indenture and Indo-Fijians by re-emphasising it.

Also, as Thomas discusses in 'The Inversion of Tradition', the enacted version of Fijian customary life are the inverse of those attributed to Indo-Fijians.¹⁶ Martha Kaplan also demonstrates how this contrast between the communal traditionalism of the Fijians and the individual commercialism of the Indo-Fijians derives from British codifications of their respective racial identities. Colonial relations with Fijians were posited as relations with communities, mediated through chiefs and land codifications, and kinship collectivities attached indissolubly to the land. Individual entrepreneurial spirit, pursuing the 'path of money' was constituted as a rejection of communal living.¹⁷ Thus Fijians were discouraged from engaging in business or cash farming. In contrast and in opposition to colonial policies in India itself, the British treated Indo-Fijians as canonically isolated individuals. As indentured labour, they were conceived of as 'labour units' defined by individual agreements with their employers. Later, they were perceived as disorderly and threatening, amplified by the fact that Indians were reluctant to support the war effort during the Second World War, demanded equal pay with British soldiers and organised strikes in this period.¹⁸ While British colonial policy emphasized the civilizing mission towards indigenous Fijians, the racial identity of immigrant Indians was established as a threat to Fijian dominance. Indo-Fijian leaders such as A. D Patel, from 1946 onwards, appropriated this colonial identity by claiming a place in the nation on the basis of their labour and economic contribution.¹⁹ The Indian indentured labourer's lament, according to poet Raymond C. Pillai, went thus:

We came in answer to your plea,
We came to build your land.
But now that you are strong and free,
You turn our hopes to sand.²⁰

Indian petitions to the Constitution Review Commission counteracted Fijian ethnocentrism²¹ with their own stereotypes:

The Indians brought Fiji out of savagery to the present brilliant, progressive and prosperous status.

Fijians want ready made money, ready made *kana* (food), ready made clothing and housing. Fairy tale life style won't work. One thing was good, that we Indo-Fijians were in Fiji, otherwise the Fijian population would have been only good enough to suit Museums and Zoos and the highland as happened in New Zealand, Australia and America with the natives.

During my stay in Fiji in September 1999 about eight months before the coup, I spoke to a number of sugar-cane farmers whose leases were about to expire. One old man said:

What the *Kaiviti* (indigenous Fijians) don't realise is that if we hadn't been used as cannon fodder on the sugar-cane plantations, they would have had to do it. They would have worked and died and their culture would have been destroyed. Why do they want to destroy us? You should have seen this land when our family got it. It was a jungle. We've made it beautiful, made it pay. It is our mother too.²²

This too expressed a relationship to the land but conceptualised differently: Indians had 'developed' the land and made Fiji 'beautiful and economical'. Therefore, though the majority of Indians are poor cane farmers, working on leased land, they represent for Fijians the immoral pursuit of the 'path of money'.

The idea that Indians were better suited than Fijians to the 'way of money' is still current. In a 1997 article, Ian Boxill claims that Indo-Fijians, by virtue of their history, are more disposed to dealing with the world capitalist economy than Fijians, because many more Fijians than Indians live in isolated rural communal settings -- on the periphery of the periphery. As indentured labourers, Indians were introduced into Fijian society as part of a global capitalist economy dominated by Britain. Despite its semifeudal nature, indentureship carried with it aspects of capitalism, including waged labour, rational calculation and individualism²³. Nii-K. Plange agrees that, under the colonial state, 'Fijian access to, and effective participation in, the newly introduced economy from structurally vantage points were discouraged.'²⁴

The way in which the two communities construct their relationships to land, the 'way of the land' opposed to the 'way of money' also informs their conceptions of nation. Since independence in 1970, the citizens of the sovereign democratic state of Fiji were engaged in a discourse of nation building. In a fascinating article, Henry Rutz writes that leaders of both communities exhorted their constituencies to imagine a multi-racial and harmonious nation. Indians wanted to be newly created citizens with full political rights, including a one person/one vote system in a civil society that subordinated the status of religion, race and particularist culture. In contrast, the Fijian rhetoric of accommodation presumed that the nation would be imagined as 'mutual respect' between different racial communities, reinforced by a narrative of 'multiracial' harmony and voting by racial communities for persons of the same race. As Rutz perceptively says, the coups of 1987 halted the experiment of transplanting an 18th century nation-state in the time-space of Fiji. It took away the Other against which the Fijian identity had been dialectically shaped by racial politics during the colonial and independence periods.²⁵ Henceforth, the contest over 'the nation' would be de-centred, resurfacing within the Fijian community itself.

After the coup in May 2000, Teresia Teaiwa²⁶ commented in a thought-provoking article that the problem with Fijian nationalism is that there is no Fijian nation. Fiji's problem, she said, was Fijian, not Indian. She contrasted the fortunes of two of Fiji's indigenous Prime ministers, Dr. Timoci Bavadra, and Sitiveni Rabuka to illustrate the increasingly problematic configuration of indigenous leadership in the country. Bavadra was consistently described as a commoner even though he had a distinguished lineage from the chiefly village of Visesei. However, Rabuka's status as a commoner was enhanced by the *mana* that came from the interweaving of his traditional *bati* or warrior genealogy (in the Eastern province of Cakaudrove), his career in modern armed forces, his identification with and deployment of Christian/Methodist discourse, his staging of the two coups d'etat in 1987, and the support he has consistently received from the Great Council of Chiefs. Rabuka even gained political mileage out of his 'human frailties': sexual and financial indiscretions, as well as flip-flopping policy decisions have increased rather than diminished his appeal.

Teaiwa highlighted the fact that 'part-Europeans' form the largest and most influential group of general voters and, in the post-coup era, they have shifted from their historical identification with colonial European privilege towards a reclamation of their 'part-Fijian' or *vasu-i-taukei* roots. This shift in "part-European" identification reflects a recognition of

the contemporary realities of political power in Fiji: indigenous Fijians rule. George Speight's father, a 'part-European' and former general elector named Sam Speight, became a 'born-again Fijian' in the post-coup era. She continued, 'George Speight claims to represent indigenous Fijian interests. Sporting his European name, speaking exclusively in English, drawing on his Australian and American degrees in business for *mana*, and wearing his designer clothes, Speight does indeed represent indigenous Fijian interests. But Speight's indigenous Fijian interests are clearly neither the indigenous Fijian interests of Ratu Mara nor those of the late Dr. Bavadra.'

Teaiwa is particularly sharp in exploring the dialectics of structure and agency in the processes of postcolonial 'nation-building' and challenging the tenets of cultural determinism in the analysis of indigenous politics in Fiji or the idealism of a seamless 'moral economy'.²⁷ Those studying the current crisis of land leases in Fiji are becoming increasingly aware that the economic and political negotiations around these issues stretch far back into a pre-colonial past in which the Deed of Cession is both event and metaphor, mediated by memory. For example, one of the rhetorical strategies linking tradition to the nation, the strategy of the betrayal of the land, is discussed in Rutz's 1995 article. The leader of the Fijian Nationalist Party (formed in 1980), Sakeasi Butradoka, argued that there was a double betrayal of land by the chiefs, the first by the Deed of Cession (the land was not the chiefs to give). The second was at independence when the queen should have handed the islands back to Fijians not to the citizens of Fiji (which included the Indo-Fijians). Butradoka claimed that independence for Fijians lay in the future, not the past because Fijians had to free themselves from the democracy which had linked their destiny to the Indians. Democracy and equality, he said, were western constructs which were major obstacles to the true independence of Fiji.²⁸

The Fijian Nationalist cannot accept the equality of all the races ... Equality of rights ... has to involve a recognized and accepted inequality of rights due to history.²⁹

In Butradoka's vision, the indigenous Fijian and the Indian Fijian could not both be equal citizens of some future Fijian nation. The propositions of both liberalism and Marxism that assume that one is born to certain particular identities and/or struggles to acquire general or universal identities of a class, of the citizen of a nation, or even of the human were anathema to him because they were incapable of describing the politics of identity in contemporary democracies. European political theory assumes that democracy is about development – of the individual into a citizen with legal and political rights, equal to all other citizens, of the nation into a secular set of communities living harmoniously with each other. These ideas in some form or another now dominate public discourse in Western democracies. In the last few decades, however, postcolonial democracy has also become about multiculturalism and diversity. In the politics of diversity, identities are not so much given and then transcended in the interest of an overarching unity; they are acquired and performed in contexts in which unities are seen as always contingent and shifting.³⁰ Indo-Fijian writer Subramani agrees:

... [W]e can move all move towards being Fijian, which, ... is an identity that we have yet to imagine fully. ... The political logic of accepting difference is inventing and supporting institutions that help difference to be maintained. It is not necessary to create one people and one nation; rather, we should learn to view a system of difference as our unity.³¹

Thus Butradoka was not saying that Indo-Fijians had to have unequal rights because they were racially inferior; indeed some Fijians claimed to need special treatment because in 'civilization' the Indians have a thousand years start on them.³² What he was saying was that the inequality was about entitlement and had to do with the necessity of history – the experiences of cession and indenture on Fijian land should ensure, rather than erase, Fijian paramountcy. In other words, Fiji could never be a democracy where Indo-Fijians and indigenous Fijians developed equally and together to become citizens with equal rights in a nation-state. Indians could never become Fijians nor was it possible for Fijian democracy to allow complete diversity.

After the coup of May 2000, a letter expressing similar sentiments about Fiji's constitutional dilemma was circulated by a group of indigenous Fijians. This letter attempted to reconcile the problematics of a democratic civil society in Fiji with indigenous paramountcy and labelled the prospect of a non-Fijian as Prime Minister 'dangerous' since 'the Indian community remains so out of touch with Fijian interests, needs, aspirations and constraints. It continued,

However, it is very problematic, nonetheless, to specify in any decree or constitution that only Fijians are eligible for certain positions or offices. To the international community this is like a red rag to a bull; such a provision may also be used by the more aggressive and less understanding of our neighbours to justify sanctions or to pressure more tolerant nations into statements or actions of condemnation. It is also unnecessary. The same outcome – the reservation of certain key political positions for Fijians – can be achieved in an internationally acceptable form by requiring that the holders of the office meet the criteria of fluency in the language, customs, practices, traditions etc. of the country. The criteria of cultural competency can be set to ensure that that it is virtually impossible for a non-Fijian to pass the required tests. Moreover, if there is any question relating to an individual's cultural competency, the Great Council of Chiefs will be the final arbiter. Moreover, the Council can readily be restricted to Fijians in that it is an exclusively indigenous organisation in which chiefs, and chiefs alone, are authorised to sit. Non-Fijians may be invited to address the Council, but no one other than chiefly Fijians would have a right of membership.³³

Laisenia Qarase, the Prime Minister of the interim government of Fiji installed by the military echoed these sentiments in September of 2000 when he addressed the United Nations:

It would seem that a new form of imperialism has emerged. As if the corrosive influence and impact of their mass culture of consumerism and materialism are not enough, this new form of domination is being propagated by the 'purists' of the liberal democracies, in the name of good governance, human rights, accountability and transparency.

But what is of concern is that we are being told to apply these standards and values of liberal democracy strictly according to their standards, without regard for the particular or complex circumstances in each country.³⁴

Qarase expressed concern that some of the fundamental principles on which the United Nations was formed, 'respect for national sovereignty and of non-interference in the internal affairs' of a member state, 'are being eroded and violated.'

While the world is 'a closely-linked global community', it does not give a country the right to impose on another its own standards of democratic governance and what it perceives or considers to be right and acceptable,' he concluded.³⁵

It is not possible to think about these issues without wrestling with the deeper implications of variant regional, local and global histories and discourses. The issues of land, nation and identity in Fiji are located fuzzily at the analytical intersection of mercantile forces, British imperialism, the experience of indenture and precolonial Fijian political cultures in transition. They cannot be approached as logical outcomes of European commercial penetration, colonization and assimilation but as historical processes involving complicated European, indigenous and indentured struggles for control over land and resources as well as power, privilege and authority in the aftermath of imperialism. In a sense, part of the problem is that both groups are employing different colonization/ conquest paradigms that are part of a zero sum game.

So where does this leave the question of Fijian identity? No identity can be pure and transparent; however, complicity or hierarchy does not make impossible the occasional, partial or contingent achievement of a measure of unity, collaboration or even solidarity.³⁶ In Fiji, for example, little attempt has been made to address the ever-shifting lines of alliance or confrontation within indigenous and indentured communities and cultures or to create convincing narratives of mutual substance, history or interdependence while the dominance of Fijian chiefly rituals in the rites of the nation casts Fiji as a nation made in the image of *vakavanua* or the Fijian way of life.

Leaders among the Indo-Fijian community now admit that their members have made few attempts to counter the feeling amongst a majority of Fijians that encouraging immigrant communities to retain, practice and promote the culture of their homelands squeezes and diminishes the place of Fijian culture in the only possible homeland of Fijian culture. For indigenous Fijians, the crucial problem with the 1997 Constitution was that it failed to acknowledge the critical, symbolic, spiritual and practical reality that the Fijian archipelago was the only possible spot on the entire planet where Fijian aspirations of nationhood and cultural pride can be experienced and performed. Once eroded or lost, there was no motherland over the horizon to which pilgrimages could be made to seek rejuvenation or solace (in a clear reference to the Indo-Fijians heritage in India). As an indigenous Fijian said to me, 'It is here or nowhere for everything that is Fijian'.³⁷

In an article on the Constitutional Review in Fiji, Robert Norton pointed out three major categories of submissions. One was the Citizen's Constitutional Forum, a multiracial well-educated and well-travelled group which pushed the secular humanist option with common roll and proportional representation. The Indian voices combined universalist ideals with communal realities, most of which were comfortable with Fijian control of land.³⁸

The more complicated submissions came from various members of the governing party, *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* (SVT). The official submission was an exposition of the relationship between *taukei* (indigenous owner), normally at the forefront of decision-making and *vulagi* (guest or foreigner) who are allowed to participate but 'they must not be domineering or forceful ... they need to be reminded time and again of this fact.' This *taukei/vulagi* relationship is challenged and contravened by the human rights concepts in which all are considered equal. The petition went on to say that 'Indians have shown no

signs of cultural assimilation or sensitivity.’ Although this view appears to be widely held by Fijians, Norton also highlighted some conciliatory rhetoric. One of Rabuka’s cabinet ministers, for example, suggested a ‘new paradigm of multi-ethnic relations. We should perhaps look at the *taukei* as the gracious host who is mindful of the interests of other communities ... the honoured guests.’

Similarly, J. N. Kamikamica, a past General Manager of the Native Land Trust Board, considers that one of Fiji’s major challenges is to resolve the meaning of *taukei* and *vulagi* so that it accords with the changing nature of Fijian society (“Fiji Native Land”, 260).³⁹ He points out that the protection of indigenous ownership of the bulk of land resources and the preservation of their culture and traditions in rural Fiji shields indigenous Fijians from the competitive world of twentieth century Fiji. But since Fiji citizenship does not bestow the same rights and privileges on the other communities, when and how, Kamikamica asks, may a non-Fijian aspire to and acquire a position similar to that of a *taukei*? (289)

For some indigenous Fijians, the only way of promoting a sense of a common cultural identity and a shared national purpose is to allow only Fijian nationalism and Fijian national identity. For them, since independence, and indeed during the country’s colonial period, the promotion of a collective national identity was discouraged as it was not clear how the Indians would be able to fit in. The result, they claim, has been an unhealthy preoccupation with provincial and ethnic rather than national interests. For them, the new Fiji - its language, symbols, institutions, anthems, history, mythology - must be unequivocally and unmistakably Fijian. Immigrant communities will have no choice other than to embrace this reality and ‘once this reality has been accepted into the marrow of all they will finally have earned the right to be called Fijians.’⁴⁰ It is interesting that this rhetoric reflects in part the sentiments expressed by fundamentalist Hindu parties in India, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party; for example their insistence that Muslims and Christians must all become Hindus first, calling themselves “Muslim Hindus” and “Christian Hindus”.

One of the complexities of this rhetoric is the concept of ‘guest or foreigner’. The metaphor of visiting implies that the visitor has a home elsewhere. In the case of Indo-Fijians, most of whom left India in situations of forced choice more than a hundred and fifty years ago, it implies a sense of impermanence and fracture without necessarily allowing the space to articulate parallel narratives of shared histories and experiences. Though chiefs like Ratu Sukuna likened Fijian, Indian and European interdependence to a three-legged stool,⁴¹ for a long time, Indian rituals were not part of Fijian national ritual. But there are many instances of previously oppressed, marginalised and silenced groups (re) claiming their pasts in an effort to feel good about their identities or even to secure identities they were once denied by the dominant groups. The coups, for example, did not erase Indo-Fijian narratives of nation, rather they silenced and subordinated them.

Joseph Carens’ proposition of ‘minimal moral standards’ is one way of assessing the Fijian predicament. Another way is encapsulated in Salman Rushdie’s argument written after the coup of May 2000:

[m]igrant peoples do not remain visitors forever. In the end, their new land owns them as once their old land did, and they have a right to own it in their turn.⁴²

In rebutting Rushdie's admittedly simplistic argument, John Hinkson championed the cause of indigenous rights in *Arena* magazine. He asked,

What if certain cultural backgrounds allow whole peoples on average to adapt more quickly to modernising settings? Does this mean they should be able to simply dominate the pre-existing cultures of this or that region?

The counter-examples he cited were those of the Han Chinese in Xinjiang and the Indonesians in West Papua⁴³.

Unfortunately, Hinkson himself is guilty of simplification. Current Chinese and Indonesian government policies encourage transmigration of Han Chinese or Madurese or Javanese into Kalimantan or West Papua. These policies can and should be resisted. For Indo-Fijians, however, the state that brought their ancestors to Fiji is long gone and no other country will assume any responsibility for their predicament. The problem in Fiji is not the 'degree of innocence' of the various parties in the equation; rather it is about the kinds of options available to the vulnerable community. One option, though fraught with uncertainty, is migration to yet another country. About 70,000 Indo-Fijians have taken this route since the 1987 coups. This opportunity, however, is practicable only for the skilled or wealthy. Other Indo-Fijians have no alternative but to fight to retain a space in Fiji where they can live with some level of dignity. And if the Fiji example were to be emulated in other countries, the effect would be to exploit the capabilities of migrant peoples while maintaining an inferior status for them; ironically rather like India's own caste system.

The case of Fiji is crucial because, as a society produced by the experience of colonialism, it demands innovative solutions. It would appear that neither the western model of democracy, nor a subjugation of one community by another is the answer to Fiji's problems. Perhaps one should look at Fijian history through the lens of colonialism. It then becomes obvious (in Dipesh Chakrabarty's words) that both Fijian and Indian cultures, knowledges, life-worlds and life-practices were invaded and colonised; that is they experienced what the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak has called 'epistemic violence'. It is this shared predicament of the Indian indentured immigrant and the indigenous Fijian landowner that creates the possibility of a dialogue between the two. This conversation is not based only on 'shared histories' (as may be claimed between the Settler and Native) but on the shared predicament of having been colonised (both politically and intellectually).⁴⁴

Some attempts have been made by Indians in Fiji to retrieve narratives of shared experiences, entanglements, engagements and conflict. I had a number of conversations with many Indo-Fijians living in Fiji in September of 1999. By this time, it was already clear that there were clouds on the political horizon. Many of my interlocutors had migrated after the first coups, over a decade ago, but had decided to return because they felt intrinsically 'Fijian'. Most spoke regretfully of the paucity of intermarriage and social interaction between the two communities and acknowledged the Indian community's contribution to inter-ethnic misunderstandings.⁴⁵ A couple of them also 'came out' as having Fijian ancestry (a grandmother in both cases), a fact that they said they would not have highlighted previously. A member of the *Kisan Sangh* (the organization of sugar-cane farmers), a staunch Hindu, told me a story (probably apocryphal). An Indian holy man who came to Fiji in the early part of the 20th century had

warned the Indian community that they would truly belong to their new country and fulfil all their desires only if they married into the Fijian community.⁴⁶

In an interview with Vilsoni Hereniko, just before the May 2000 coup, the Indo-Fijian writer Subramani spoke of his vision for Fiji:

I would like to see a seamless flow of languages. That would be very interesting, something unique. It would make Pacific literature different. In the same way, I think cultures could also flow like that. Then we would have a lot of integration happening and new cultural forms emerging ... If you go to some of our schools now, it's already happening. In the playground students switch from one language to another. They speak a pidgin variety of English that freely incorporates Fijian and Hindi. But it's not reinforced in the classroom, where English is still the dominant language ... The multilingual medium could have a great impact. I think we'll have a situation in which there's great audience participation. At the moment when you watch television, Hindi, Fijian, and English programs appear separately. There will be a time in the future when programs will not be divided that way; instead there will be a spontaneous flow of multilingual programs.⁴⁷

The archives also have similar stories. They tell us, for example, that when the coolie ship *Syria* was wrecked in 1894, some Fijians looted the ship but many others swam out to save the shipwrecked. They also make clear that in spite of British laws proscribing such activities, Fijian villages in the 19th century sheltered Indian labourers who fled the plantations. The autobiography of Totaram Sanadhya tells us that there were also some indigenous Fijians who worked in the sugar plantations in spite of Arthur Gordon. When, starving and unable to bear the horrible conditions of plantation life in Fiji, he was about to hang himself, some indigenous Fijians who had previously lived in his coolie line not only prevented him from doing so but also brought him food from their villages.⁴⁸ And as recently as the 1980s, an Indian visionary and mystic (Harigyan Samalia) propounded his own vision of a united Fiji, drawing eclectically upon a range of opposed narratives, and ritual practices; combining rituals commemorating indenture with Fijian Christianity, creating a cosmology that included both Indian and Fijian gods, invoking the rhetoric of Fiji the fatherland and India the motherland. He tried to create a narrative, a history of mutual interdependence of Fiji's peoples where the presence of Indians was not historical contingency but historical necessity.⁴⁹

These and other stories tell us that there were many and diverse, if hidden, engagements and relationships between indentured Indian labour and indigenous Fijians. Discourses on co-existence and strengthening of inter-ethnic accord in Fiji have to be grounded in an acknowledgment of these engagements and recognition of difference and complementarity in ideology and political institutions. It is important, in this context, to create a space where powerful counter-hegemonic narratives of indigenous and indentured politics, culture and power can be articulated. These following two quotations are instructive. One is from a submission by an Indo-Fijian to the Constitutional Review Commission in 1995:

We Indians are not happy, because we are part and parcel of Fijian people. How are we omitted? [from the 1990 constitution] ... when Fijians are photo, Indians are frame. When Fijians are shirt, Indians are buttons. You take the frame out, the photo drops. You take the buttons out, the shirt looks ugly and useless.⁵⁰

The other is from an indigenous Fijian who in an article called 'Across the Fence', after reflecting on the numerous childhood relationships with Indo-Fijians, concludes:

In a different setting and through different faces I still see the faces, the human variety, of my early contacts but hopefully through more understanding eyes and with a will to step inside the fence. But I need to be invited.

As for the fence, it is probably still necessary, and I would hope that it continues to remain – for the sake of the mystery in human existence. But let it be an accessible, explorable mystery.⁵¹

Notes

¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty speaking at a workshop on Subaltern, Multicultural and Indigenous Histories, UTS, July 20 – 21, 2000

² See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts', *Representations*, 37, Winter 1992.

³ Florencia Mallon, 'The Promise and Dilemma of Subaltern Studies: Perspectives from Latin American History', *American Historical Review*, 99 (5), December 1994, 1506.

⁴ See for example Brooke Larson's *Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia: Cochabamba, 1550-1900*, (Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press) 1988.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 1992.

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000.

⁷ Peter France, *The Charter of the Land: Custom and Colonization in Fiji*, (Oxford University Press, London and Melbourne) 1969, 107.

⁸ R. Gerard Ward, 'Land in Fiji', in Brij V. Lal and Tomasi R. Vakatora, *Fiji in Transition: Research Papers of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission*, Vol 1, (University of the South Pacific, Suva) 1997, p. 248.

⁹ J. N. Kamikamica, 'Fiji Native Land: Issues and Challenges', *Fiji in Transition*, Lal and Vakatora, 1997, p. 259.

¹⁰ Josetaki Waqanisau, 'Fijians' Paramountcy- Let's think rationally', undated letter circulated by email by academics at University of the South Pacific after the coup in May 2000. I have a hard copy in my possession. This name appears to be a pseudonym and the identity of the writer is unknown to the USP academics who circulated the letter. However, the figures appear to be credible.

¹¹ Peter France, 1969.

¹²¹² Henry J. Rutz, 'Capitalizing on Culture: Moral Ironies in Urban Fiji', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29, July 1987, p. 557.

¹³ Peter France, 1969.

¹⁴ Ruta, 1987, p. 538.

¹⁵ Margaret Jolly, 'Custom and the Way of the Land: Past and Present in Vanuatu and Fiji', *Oceania* 62, 1992.

¹⁶ Nicholas Thomas, 'The Inversion of Tradition', *American Ethnologist*, May 1992, v19, n2.

¹⁷ Marrtha Kaplan, 'The Coups in Fiji: Colonial Contradictions and the Post-Colonial Crisis', *Critique of Anthropology*, 7 (3), 1988, pp. 101 – 6.

¹⁸ Kaplan, 1988, p. 106. See also Brij V. Lal's *Broken Waves: a History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu) 1992 and *Crossing the Kala Pani: a Documentary History of Indian Indenture in Fiji*, Canberra,

(Division of Pacific & Asian History, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies), Australian National University; Suva, Fiji, Fiji Museum, 1998.

¹⁹ Margaret Jolly, 1992, p.346.

²⁰ Raymond C. Pillai, 'Labourer's Lament', in Subramani (ed.) *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, (University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1979), p. 160.

²¹ Robert Norton, 'Reconciling Ethnicity and Nation: Contending Discourses in Fiji's Constitutional Reform', *The Contemporary Pacific*, Spring 2000 v12 i1 p110.

²² Interview with Interlocutor Lautoka A16, September 12, 1999 (my translation).

²³ Ian Boxill, 'Fiji: the Limits of Ethnic Political Mobilisation', *Race and Class*, Oct-Dec 1997 v39 n2 p41.

²⁴ Nii-K. Plange, 'The "Three Fijis" Thesis: a Critical Examination of a Neo-Empiricist Naturalistic Analysis of Fiji's polity', *The Journal of Pacific Studies*, Vol. 15, 1990, p. 21.

²⁵ Henry J. Rutz, 'Occupying the Headwaters of Tradition: Rhetorical Strategies of Nation Making in Fiji', in R. J. Foster (ed.), *Nation Making: Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor) 1995.

²⁶ Teresia Teaiwa, 'Fiji Crisis: An Analysis', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22nd May, 2000

²⁷ Henry Rutz, 1987.

²⁸ Henry Rutz, 1995.

²⁹ Ralph Premdas, 'Constitutional Challenge: the Rise of Fijian Nationalism', *Pacific Perspective* 9, 1980, p. 36.

³⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000.

³¹ Subramani, *Altering Imagination*, (Fiji Writers' Association University of the South Pacific, Suva), 1995.

³² R. Norton, 2000, p 106.

³³ Letter from a group of unnamed indigenous Fijians circulated on a Fiji email list in June 2000. A hard copy is in my possession.

³⁴ United Press International, Sept 18, 2000

³⁵ UPI, 2000.

³⁶ Mallon, 1994.

³⁷ These sentiments were expressed in a number of emails and conversations with indigenous Fijians over the latter half of 2000.

³⁸ See R. Norton, 2000.

³⁹ J. N. Kamikamica, p. 259.

⁴⁰ Letter cited in endnote 25. Also interviews with interlocutors Suva S2, T3 and Nadi P4 and L7.

⁴¹ Deryck Scarr, *The Three Legged Stool: Selected Writings of Ratu Sukuna* (London) 1983.

⁴² *Age*, 10 June 2000

⁴³ John Hinkson, 'Dislocations -- Salman Rushdie And Fiji', *Arena Magazine*, August 2000 p5.

⁴⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000.

⁴⁵ See for example Robert Norton, 2000, p. 93, "Ever since the advent of colonialism, our people have been trained to think along communal lines. ... We were fed stereotypes: Indians as crafty, greedy, and individualist--and indigenous Fijians as lazy, unable to come to terms with modernisation, lacking the incentive and skills for economic enterprise....".

⁴⁶ Various interviews conducted in Fiji in September of 1999.

⁴⁷ An Interview with Subramani by Vilsoni Hereniko, *The Contemporary Pacific*, Spring 2001 v13 i1 p184.

⁴⁸ Totaram Sanadhya, *Bhut Len ki katha: Totaram Sanadhya ka Fiji*, Translated and edited by Brij V. Lal and Yogendra Yadav, (Saraswati Press New Delhi) 1994.

⁴⁹ Martha Kaplan, 'Blood on the Grass and Dogs Will Speak: Ritual Politics and the Nation in Independent Fiji', in R. J. Foster (ed.), *Nation Making: Emergent Identities in Postcolonial Melanesia*, (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor) 1995.

⁵⁰ Parmanand Singh, Submission 024044 to Constitutional Review Commission, 1995, in Fiji National Archives, Suva.

⁵¹ Pia Manoa, "Across the Fence", in Subramani (ed.) *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, p. 206

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