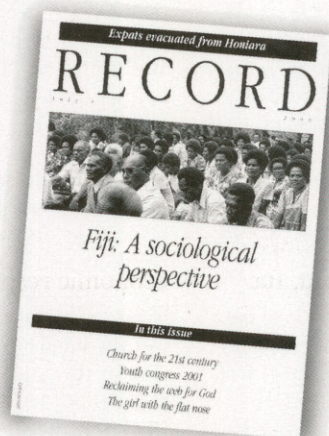


Fiji: A Sociological Perspective

A sociologist considers George Speight's accession



By Robert Wolfgramm

Reprinted from the July 1, 2000, issue of the *Record* with permission from Signs Publishing Company, Victoria, Australia

Indigenous Fijians comprise about half of Fiji's 800,000 people. Some 99.5 per cent of the indigenous population identify themselves as Christian, belonging to one denomination or another. They identify themselves in either of two ways: First, with the church they were born into—that is, the church affiliation of a relevant parent. This is important since having a religion or, more crucially, a religious label, is as much a part of Fijian identity as having any other cultural marker (such as language or clan-group and so forth).

Or, second, they define themselves by the church they were last baptized into. This is significant because Fijians are increasingly switching churches in ways usually associated with contemporary forms of American Christianity. This source of self-identification, though, doesn't necessarily mean one is practicing regular church attendance, or is a member in good and regular standing.

For every 100 Fijian Christians, 70 will be Methodist and 20 will be Catholic. Of the remaining 10, one will be an Assemblies of God (including other Pentecostal varieties), one a Seventh-day Adventist, and the rest a spread of Anglicans, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Salvation Army, Presbyterian and others.

Methodism is the dominant form of Fijian Christianity because it arrived first—in the 1830s. It entrenched itself through the 1854 conversion of influential high chief, Seru Cakobau of the kingdom of Bau. Roman Catholicism arrived in the 1860s but did not find an audience until the 1880s and mostly among Cakobau's chiefly rivals in Rewa and Taveuni.

Enter the Adventists

The "three Johns" brought Adventism to Fiji in the 1890s: first through the short-lived work of John Tay (who died in Suva a few months after arrival); then through John Cole on Ovalau island (where Fiji's first capital

Levuka is located); and then John Fulton successfully ministered to high chiefs on Viti Levu. Fulton's legacy saw Adventism successfully established in parts of Fiji where Methodism and Catholicism had failed. Fijians within the chiefdoms of Suva, Ra, Cob, the Wainibuka and Tailevu became strong advocates.

George Speight's Fijian ancestors hail from Tailevu and Ra. He was raised in an Adventist home and baptized at Suvavou—the church headquarters and chiefly village of the original Suva people. (It should be noted that he has not been a practicing Adventist for many years.) His father converted to Adventism in the 1960s and his mother hails from the predominantly Adventist village of Natokalau, Ra.

Although politics eventually drew his father, Sam Speight, away from church commitment, he was instrumental in establishing the English speaking church at the historic Tamavua site in Suva and has, over the years, still been identified as a Seventh-day Adventist.

This was subtly underscored when the strategic importance of being a Fijian became clear because of the racial provisions of the 1990 Constitution. Sam sought and gained retrospective registration as a Fijian in the *Vola Ni Kawwa Bula* (the registry of official Fijians) by taking the name *Savenacca Tokainavo*—a name that may be translated: “loud cry of the remnant”!

That there are Fijian Adventists who strongly support George Speight's pro-indigenous cause cannot be denied. Some also endorse his political means and personal ambitions and are now participating in the crisis. But Fijian church leaders Pastor Waisea Vuniwa and Joe Talemaitoga have rightly and publicly distanced themselves from this stance.

But any Adventists committed to Speight are not doing so because he is “one of us” (that is, his Adventist background), but because they are participants in a wider Fijian Christian nationalism subscribed to by Fijians of *all* denominations.

Reinventing Fiji

Speight's support is Fijian because his desire is to reinvent Fiji along lines that guarantee indigenous political supremacy. His “natural” electorate is the silent majority of Fijians (66 per cent of the indigenous population) who live outside urban centers such as Suva. They understand little of the virtues of globalization and democracy, and have little patience

with the idea of non-Fijian rule of their *vanua* (land and people).

For them, life is a routine of subsistence economy and ritual obligations—as it has been for thousands of years. Few in these rural-island settings have electricity in their homes, and the vast majority are based in villages that have never hosted an Indian visitor. Theirs is a world of geographic isolation and social segregation within a traditional hierarchical polity—a postcard reality from which they can see no reason for departure.

The bottom-line in their outlook is to be found in their relationship to the *vanua* when understood as an economic resource. Of the 4.25 million acres that is Fiji, indigenous Fijians have usufructuary rights to about 3.5 million acres (called native land). But, as any farmer knows, it is not how much land you have, but how good it is. Three-quarters of native land is non-fertile or non-arable land. Useless for large-scale cultivation, it forms the backyard for most Fijian villages.

Much of the rest of their native tide is leased by the government to others, including Indians. The present leases have run for 30 years and have been pegged at a lowly 6 per cent of the undeveloped value of the property. Of the remaining 750,000 acres, about half is Crown land. The other half is the most fertile and arable, but it is freehold and mostly owned by non-Fijian locals or foreigners (including Australian absentee landlords) and beyond the dreams of most Fijians. They have little hope of regaining that land by free market purchase.

Because Fijian freehold land was alienated before the colonial era but fixed forever by that era, Fijians believe themselves to be the truly aggrieved race in this matter.

Christian Nationalist Movement

And this is where their Christianity comes in to play. Speight's support is Christian because the Fijian plight is interpreted by the indigenous nationalists through a biblical lens. Being a persecuted and exploited remnant is a recurring Scriptural theme, especially in the Old Testament. They are encouraged in this by American fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible and funded by independent ministries—some of which are Adventist.

Fijian Christian nationalists see the Fijian people as a kind of Israel, who, despite suffering and hard-

ship, are called to be a light of gospel salvation in the Pacific. One day they will be free of the "stranger" in the land.

This brief includes the desire for the constitutional establishment of Christianity as the state religion for Fiji. For instance, during the consultative process for shaping the 1997 Constitution, this was the largest single issue upon which Fijians made submission—including an official submission in favor of a state religion from the Methodist Church.

While some Adventists support the proposal, the mainstream view is that gloving the hand of religion with the power of the state has prophetic consequences which are potentially totalitarian. This, from an Adventist perspective, is unacceptable. But it is not a new thing. Fijian Christian nationalism has been formed for well over 100 years. No sooner had Christian missions arrived on Viti Levu during the colonial era, than 19th century indigenous prophets like Navosavakadua ("he who speaks but once") arose in Ra proclaiming that the Fijian people already knew about Christ. In fact, the earliest missionaries reported that the creator-god in the Fijian pantheon was one called, Ove (sounds like Jehovah) and were startled to find Fijians practicing circumcision.

By the first decades of the 20th century, another Ra figure, Apolosi Nawai ("lord of the holy water") arose in the Wainibuka to proclaim the same message but with a strand of economic nationalism.

These ideas have been sustained in Fiji since the independence era began in 1970. Viliame Savu from the island of Nayau (the ancestral Lauan home of former prime minister and now deposed president Ratu Mara) set up his Fijian Independent Party in 1972 to proclaim the message of Fijian political exclusivity.

Agitator, Sakeasi Butadroka (from the Rewa delta which is home to Ratu Mara's chiefly wife, Adi Lala) formed the Fijian Nationalist Party at the same time. He later renamed it more explicitly as the Fijian Christian Nationalist Party. The objective was again to rally Fijians to the cause of indigenous supremacy and to the idea that Ratu Mara in particular was a mediator of globalism and democracy—values that would spell the end of Fijian culture and her people.

In 1987, by his military coups, Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka was championed by these Fijian Christian nationalists as one who would fulfill their aims. Rabuka also saw himself in a messianic light as one called by God to defend Fijian Christian values against modernization and secularism.

To help keep him on track, in 1990, Francis Waqa Sokonibogi established the Kudru Na Vanua ("grumbling of the land and her people"—a lobby-group to publicly voice support or protest. As the decade passed, Rabuka, now as prime minister, proved unworthy of his assignment as he openly confessed to sexual infidelities and, worse, evinced shifting toward a more global-democratic perspective on the other.

The Current Situation

The present upheaval has its immediate roots in 1995 when Rabuka typically promised that he would introduce a more democratic Constitution for Fiji as well as listen to grassroots Fijians (who were avowedly antidemocratic!). After a consultative process, the majority of Fiji's 14 indigenous provinces unsurprisingly rejected proposed revisions for his new draft Constitution, but Rabuka went ahead with its adoption anyway. Fijian Christian nationalists committed themselves to his downfall.

In the 1999 elections, he was swept from office together with the Indian party representing elite business interests. Indigenous disenchantment with the Rabuka era and Indian disenchantment with his elite Indian alliances, opened the way for the election of the labor-dominated People's Coalition government of Mahendra Chaudhry.

That election began a destabilization campaign which has led inexorably to George Speight's accession through the barrel of a gun. It is an outcome that has opportunism riding on the back of patriotism. Failed businessmen, disenchanted militia, ambitious chiefs and ordinary Fijians have all been thrown together by an indigenous Christian nationalism that shows no sign of abating.

Indeed, the more their vision is decried and stymied, the higher the stakes become and the more determined their martyrdom. Whether Speight personally succeeds in establishing their vision or not, his legacy will be that indigenous Christian and nationalist priorities will have to be firmly on the agenda for any future Fiji government.

Robert Wolfgramm is an Adventist academic whose Ph.D. investigated Fijian identity. He has also been a consultant to some Fijian nationalist groups.