

**For King and Country:  
A Talk on the Pacific War in Fiji**

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On 1 July 1939 a very curious poem appeared in the pages of the Fiji Times, arguably the most loyal newspaper in the most loyal, dutiful colony in the British Empire. Titled "To Whom It May Concern," it went like this:

Please be kind to Britain,  
 She isn't very strong,  
 Her Navy is inefficient,  
 Her Army's all gone wrong.  
 Her ARP \* is useless,  
 Her Airforce is far too small,  
 Her people so degenerate,  
 She has no morale at all!  
 She doesn't want to fight you,  
 She's so convinced you'd win,  
 She'll let you take her Empire,  
 If it will save her skin.  
 She's old, decayed and senile,  
 And you have strength and youth,  
 So please be kind to Britain,  
 Don't keep abusing Britain,  
 Be nice to poor old Britain,  
 Or, you may learn the truth.

The truth about Great Britain was quite simple. It emerged from the war a devastated nation, diminished in international stature. Its once mighty, far-flung empire began to crumble and creak around it. Soon, with India leading the way, the sun would set forever on waves that Britannia had ruled for well over a century. But the truth about the Pacific War in Fiji is not quite so

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\*ARP: air raid precaution

simple. Except for a few brief months during the entire period of the Pacific War, Fiji was never in danger of invasion from any quarter. Not a single shot was fired, not a single life lost on Fijian soil itself for the defense of those islands. And yet the war became a powerful symbolic event in Fijian history, bequeathing a legacy of suspicion, division, distrust, and hostility among the different communities in Fiji.

The Fiji war in its various aspects is too large a topic for me to cover in this paper so I'll be brief and confine myself to one or possibly two related questions.<sup>1</sup> The first is: How did the different ethnic groups in Fiji, the Fijians, the Indians, and the Europeans, respond to the government-inspired war effort, and how did they perceive the war, its importance and significance for their own communities and for the colony as a whole? Let us take the indigenous Fijian response first. Their response was quick, warm, and extremely generous. In 1943, the peak period, there were 8513 men in uniform in Fiji, half of whom were in the labor corps. Of these 6371 were indigenous Fijians. Local and expatriate Europeans, particularly from New Zealand, contributed 1870, and Indians numbered a paltry 264. The Fijians justifiably emerged from the war as heroes, praised for their bravery and cunning in jungle warfare, their steadiness under fire, and their loyalty and dedication to the cause of the British Empire. Their record of accomplishment, as measured by the number of awards they won, is impressive. Altogether they received 29 decorations, including a posthumous Victoria Cross, and 25 mentions in dispatches.

The question is: Why did the Fijian community respond so enthusiastically? It seems to me that there are at least four or five reasons which help us understand the quick Fijian response. First, culture had a role to play. Fijians were no strangers to war, which was a constant and important part of their life in precolonial times. Fighting was, as Charles Wilks described in the 1840s, "a noble employment of man and a path to honor and status for young men" (Ravuvu 1974, 1). This was also the case in many other Pacific Island societies. Courage and valor, prowess in war--these were values upon which Fijian culture placed a very high premium. Another important reason for the prompt Fijian response, I think, was the fact that the people who did the recruiting were high chiefs, in some cases paramount chiefs. Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, only a couple of rungs below God in most Fijian eyes according to his biographer Deryck Scarr (1980), led the recruiting effort. He was Oxford educated, a member of the bar, and a distinguished high chief in the employ of the colonial civil service. He toured the villages, talked and advised, and enlisted young men with great success. Several other very high Fijian chiefs enlisted as officers in various platoons, and their presence was inspiring to young men willing to prove their loyalty to the Crown. "Fijians will never be

recognized unless our blood is shed first," said Sukuna, to great effect. And coming from him, these words carried great weight. So, at one level, the active enlisting was seen as fulfilling a traditional obligation to the *turaga* 'chief', and to the *vanua* 'land' (see Ravuvu 1974). The principle of reciprocity was clearly at work here.

Whatever we may think of the effects of colonialism in the Pacific or Fiji, most Fijian chiefs did not actively dislike the British or their policies. They saw the coming of the British to Fiji in a positive light. Gordon's policy of indirect rule had preserved Fijian traditions, institutions, and values, albeit in a significantly modified form (see France 1969). The Great Council of Chiefs was the body that was directly responsible for much of the government of indigenous Fijian society. The colonial government had acted to prevent land alienation with a result that 83 percent of all land in Fiji today remains in Fijian hands. The Fijian chiefs saw the government of Fiji not as a one-way street but as a partnership involving themselves and the colonial government. And in things that mattered to them, the welfare of their own society, they had complete control. Given this situation it is not surprising to find that when one partner was under attack, the other felt obliged to come to its assistance. There were of course throughout Fijian history many Fijian voices of dissent. In the early part of this century there was Apolosi Nawai, and in the 1920s Fijians in southern Viti Levu youth organizations, such as the Viti Cauravou, at times advocated refusal to pay tax because they complained of neglect and isolation, of being treated like children. But they were suppressed by the combined power of chiefs and colonial officialdom.

For the most part, though, trust characterized the relationship between chiefs and the government. Ratu Sukuna, the first Fijian to be knighted, had a certain undoubted love for British culture and British institutions. Opposing an Indian push for complete adult franchise in 1934, he said in the Legislative Council: "Fijians desire a form of government in which British culture, a sense of fair play and justice are going to preponderate. That, sir," he said to the speaker, "is a desire we hold very strongly" (Scarr 1980). A year before, in 1933, opposing Indian calls for political equality with Europeans, Sukuna had said in the Legislative Council: "The question of equality has been raised and I should like to say publicly that so far as the Fijians are concerned, we think we are very well treated, and for the next two, three, four generations we will look to European leadership and expect the Europeans to lead us until such times as we are able to guide ourselves" (Scarr 1980). Similar sentiments were expressed in 1961, 1965, 1969, and indeed today, right now as I speak, the paramount chiefs of Fiji are beseeching the Queen to keep the title of Tui Viti, despite unceremoniously severing links with the Crown. The fact was that many chiefs were educated in Britain; "going up" to Oxford, even for a

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minor administrative course for a couple of months, was a source of great prestige and status in a community and colony that placed high premium on rituals, ceremonies, and protocol. And the fact that they shared the same religion and played "rugger" and cricket together helped to reinforce bonds of solidarity between the Fijians and the Europeans. So it was only natural for chiefs to come to the assistance of their mentors and protectors in a time of need.

But while sentiment played a part in determining the quality and magnitude of Fijian response, political calculations were not far below the surface. These were clearly understood if not always publicly articulated. Changes that displeased Fijian chiefs were in the offing. Indians demanded full democracy, elected government, and equality with Europeans. And as we might guess, these were things that chiefs opposed because such things as democracy and elections posed direct and very real threats to their status and the basis of their power. Then there were the demands from the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), the monopoly sugar company in Fiji, which could not be ignored. The company led an attempt in the 1930s to get the Fijian landlords to open up land and to give more secure leases to Indian tenants. And that, too, threatened the Fijian hold on power. Ratu Sukuna saw very clearly indeed that if he was going to stop the tide of change threatening to undermine Fijian chiefly power (as he saw it), he needed to get the British government on his side. A strong show of loyalty would do the trick, and the war provided that opportunity. He was not disappointed. Changes after the war gave an expanded role for Fijian chiefs in a revitalized Fijian administration. It was reformed and revitalized in 1946. The government reaffirmed its pledge to uphold the promises of the Deed of Cession to maintain the paramountcy of Fijian interests in Fiji. The chiefs, thus, were able to kill two birds with one stone. They got what they wanted and, on the other hand, demonstrated their loyalty to the empire.

The Indian response, in contrast, was, as I have said, paltry and indirect. They raised money through carnivals, games, and direct contributions--enough, surprisingly, to buy a bomber, which was named the Fiji Indian, for the Royal Air Force. Some who couldn't put up with petty acts of racial discrimination in Fiji went to New Zealand and joined the Narrow Neck and Maori camps. Others with some European blood joined the part-European platoon in Fiji. Hundreds joined the Labour Corps and served in Fiji for the entire duration of the war. But as far as actual soldiering went, their response was unenthusiastic. They were labeled disloyal and seditious, and their descendants have been tainted with the supposed cowardly sins of their fathers and forefathers.

Why this paltry response? Were Indians actually actively disloyal? Let us consider several things. In the first place, what is not often realized is that the government did not want Indians to enroll as soldiers in the armed forces. An Indian platoon was created in 1934 but disbanded in 1941. Instead, the government wanted Indians as laborers and as workers. That was the way, the governor told the Indians, that they could make their valuable contributions to the war effort. Listen to the governor in a radio broadcast in 1941. He urged the Indians "To remember always that the best way to win a war is in the first place to increase the general level of production by working with increased effort in whatever may be the normal employment. And in the second, to fit themselves with any special responsibility for which they may be selected." The second part was a half-hearted afterthought. No serious and sustained effort was ever made to recruit Indians to fight in the Fiji Defence Forces.

The second reason for Indian reluctance was European insistence on maintaining double standards in the matter of pay. European soldiers received 3 shillings a day, wife separation allowance of 3 shillings per week, and child allowance of 1 shilling and 6 pence. Non-European soldiers received 2 shillings per day, half the European rate of wife separation allowance, and one-third the child allowance. The Indians simply, and quite understandably, insisted on equal pay, equal work, equal value, equal risk. The government refused. It refused because it knew that Fiji was never really under any imminent threat of attack. And Indians refused to concede that, on the battlefield, a white soldier's life was worth more than a non-white soldier's life. Today no one would seriously question the principle of equal pay for equal work. But in colonial Fiji it was seditious to even think of equality with Europeans.

The third reason for the Indians' lukewarm response was that unlike the Fijians, the Indians did not have a warm recollection of their colonial experience in Fiji. Whereas the Fijians remembered protection and various safeguards, Indians remembered servitude, cultural deracination, violence, and an unaided, lonely struggle for survival after the end of indenture in 1920. The colonial government was rightly perceived as uncaring, unsympathetic, and working in collusion with the CSR. Indeed, in every dispute that farmers had with the company from the 1920s to the 1960s, the government always sided with the company, using on all occasions strong tactics to break up industrial strikes. The company was also a major landholder in Fiji. Those tenants who lived on its estates were bound by a contract that minutely regulated every aspect of the tenant's life. You couldn't even plant vegetables for your own use on CSR estate land without the company's permission. You couldn't keep a milk cow, a goat, poultry, or anything else without the

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company's authorization. And CSR made it very clear that it didn't want Indians to enlist for overseas service because that would mean loss of income and loss of labor for its own operation. Thus, when the time came for Indians to decide who to listen to, they knew what to do. They called the CSR a tyrannical mother-in-law and the government a dutiful daughter-in-law. I've seen no record anywhere of the government ever leaning on the CSR to make it less painful for its tenants to leave for service in the Labour Corps or on the battlefield.

Membership in the British Empire was not the badge of honor for the Indians that it obviously was for the Europeans and Fijian chiefs. As one official noted, the possibility of the decline of the British Empire aroused in the Indian "no emotion stronger than incredulity that the British should have allowed themselves to be reduced to this humiliating plight." He continued: "To the Indians we live among here, the Empire is no national heritage, no proud monument to the distinguished history of their race. It is something extraneous to their culture and they could face with equanimity the prospect of it being shaken to pieces by the convulsions of this war."

Two other things need to be mentioned. One is that the Indians did not share the dark view that the British painted of Japanese as monstrous human beings whose brutality knew no bounds. They listened to Radio Azad, broadcast from Tokyo at the crack of dawn every day, and heard Japan talk about a new order, freedom for the Asiatic races, and the end of British colonialism in Asia and the Pacific. The colonial government, of course, scoffed at these promises, but one Indian asked, "How can we know it is false when we haven't even given it a try? After all, there might be something in it!" When one prominent Fiji Indian leader was asked how he might respond if the Japanese came, he said: "Well, now that you (the Japanese) have come to live among us, you must do your very best for our social welfare." The British thought that seditious.

The second thing that should be borne in mind is that for many Indians at that time (1930s and 1940s) India was still the emotional and spiritual homeland. Emerging from the shadows of indenture they were trying to forge an identity for themselves in this period. Naturally, inevitably, they turned to India. It is only to be expected that Indian political thought and political developments in this period would influence the attitude of people in Fiji. If the colonial government in Fiji had been more caring and more sympathetic to the needs of Indian farmers and workers, the Indians might have been less inclined to look for help outside the colony. But that was not the case. For all these reasons then--culture, history, sentiment, and ideology--the Indian response remained lukewarm. Fiji Indians were not actively disloyal or seditious; Fijian exuberance only made it seem so.

What about Europeans? Well, it was their war and, as was to be expected, they rallied behind the war effort with total dedication. They knew that without the British Empire, they would be reduced to nothing, without the jobs and status they enjoyed in the colony. Men joined the different regiments and went abroad, and women formed such societies as the Patriotic Knitting and Sewing Society to talk about the war and raise money. They put up with the inconvenience of rations, curfews, and other restrictions. But as they listened to Australian radio and heard terrible news about heavy casualties, especially among colonial regiments from Australia and New Zealand, anti-English sentiment began to emerge slowly among the local Europeans. One example: "John Bull is sitting tight and secure in his little island, accepting heroic sacrifices in blood and treasure from his children overseas but unwilling to take any risks on their behalf in return." They accused "the British lion of deserting its cubs and leaving them to be devoured by the Japanese tiger."

But it was the Americans, who came in large numbers, who caught the full brunt of Australasian and local European bitterness and frustration. One reason was the circulation of wild rumors. Noted one official, "The periodic flare-up of anti-American sentiment among Kiwi troops appears to have its origins in an emotional reaction to stories about American soldiers in New Zealand. Tales of desertion of wives and sweethearts for Americans do circulate freely and each man feels his girl is being stolen or seduced." And the Americans did not make it easy for themselves either. For example, they did not comport themselves to the prescribed norms of Anglo-Australasian social behavior in Fiji. They drank heavily in public, they womanized, talked freely, and generally "had a good time."

The Americans posed another kind of threat to the established order as well. In their dealings with non-Europeans they were often generous, open, and congenial, which was quite a contrast to the ritualized and closely regulated conduct between local Europeans and non-whites. For example, Americans didn't mind too much if Indian drivers went into the camps and walked or drove away with a few gallons of petrol for their trucks. And they didn't mind paying a few shillings to Fijians for horses stolen from the Sabeto Indian settlement. They shared their cigarettes and on occasion their whisky in return for a few favors. The colonial government called Americans "Strangers with novel viewpoints and unfamiliar ways causing a silent but far from painless upheaval in the lives of all the communities." It feared that American friendliness toward the local population might put the government into a "thoroughly uncomfortable fire."

But that was not to be. The Americans left, leaving behind memories of a different kind of sahib: efficient, impatient with rituals, and generous. And it

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didn't take too long for old colonial ways of doing things to reassert themselves. Still, in many ways Fiji of 1945 was very different from Fiji of 1939. Demobilized Fijian men went back to the villages, many broken by all kinds of diseases, such as tuberculosis, malaria, and smallpox. They went with strange and wonderful stories. One of my favorites is recounted by Asesela Ravuvu in his book *Fijians at War*. It is about Fijian soldiers not wanting to train when they had a hangover, or when it was wet and miserable outside. They would eat hot chillies, raise their body temperature, sweat, and then tell the doctors, "Look, I have a fever, I can't go out today." Ravuvu also tells the story about the valiant Viliame Lomasalate of Platoon No. 5 who, prevented from keeping his promise to eat the first enemy he killed in the Solomons, nevertheless managed to eat the eyeballs of a dead Japanese soldier which he had scooped out with his pocket knife. Such fierce patriotism and loyalty to the cause of the war earned for the Fijian soldiers a glorious reputation as among the best jungle fighters in the world.

At the end of the war the colonial government gave about five thousand sets of agricultural equipment to the demobilized Fijian soldiers to take back to their villages to replant their neglected gardens and reinvigorate the subsistence economy. A money economy entered the village after the war, and in the Fijian villages on the periphery of towns tinned goods (fish, mutton) began to replace some of the traditional items of exchange. Before the war European and Fijian leaders had, in their own ways, opposed Indian demands for political change and social equality. Their experiences during the war--the camaraderie of the battlefield and their common dedication to the cause of the empire--augmented their shared hostility toward Indians and forged a bond of friendship, which has endured ever since, between the two groups. The war also transformed the character and the role of the Fijian military: the Fiji Defence Forces, created solely for the defense of Fiji itself, were given a new role as the Fiji military forces, which could be sent out to any part of the British Empire needing soldiers. By design as well as default, then, the Fiji military force was necessarily Fijian dominated. An accident of history had given the Fijians a power more important, as we now know, than the ballot box. They jealously guarded the Fijian domination of the armed forces with what results I need not say. The truth about the Pacific War in Fiji, then, is not simple.

#### Note

1 This paper is an edited transcription of my talk given at the 1988 conference. A fully documented study is in preparation.



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